

From Reason To Religion

(A psychological summery of the Vedic philosophy)

Purnima L. Toolsidass

From Reason To Religion

Index

	Page No.
Foreword	
Chapter 1. Where Am I?	4
Chapter 2. My Religion and me.	8
Chapter 3. Questions that come to mind.	22
Chapter 4. Dharma.	52
Chapter 5. Avatar.	60
Chapter 6. Karma, Prarabdha, Sanchit.	65
Chapter 7. Purushartha	70
Chapter 8. Yoga.	73
Chapter 9. Sanskaras.	75
Chapter 10. Gratuities from my Guru.	79
Chapter 11. Gnan.	85
Chapter 12. The Gita.	89
Chapter 13. Conclusion.	95
Chapter 14. For Non Believers.	98
Chapter 15. For Believers.	102

Foreword

It is widely believed that the sacred knowledge of the Vedas and scriptures is having a profound impact on individuals. But sadly, there has been a gradual decline in the awareness and practice of the code of dharma prescribed in the Vedas.

The book titled From Reason To religion by Purnima L. Toolsidass seeks to unbolt the doorways for humanity's shift from physical survival mode to a self actualized mode. It gives us insights into the classical Vedic thought inspiring us to look for the immense possibilities of opening to divine grace.

An introduction to the Vedas in ancient Indian scriptures reads 'The Vedas encompass the human life. They do not belong to a particular religion or a race or a country. They are the holy scriptures of Hinduism, but they equally belong to the human race.' Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a philosopher, statesman, and one of the most influential Indian thinkers in academic circles referred to the Vedas as 'The earliest documents of the human mind.' The purpose of the study of the Vedas therefore is to discover and understand the truth behind the phenomenal universe and human existence.

I am pleased to write the foreword for this book as it's designed to help people with religious impasse as also those devoid of insights.

It has been my privilege to know Purnima L. Toolsidass since my childhood days, whom I fondly call Punam Chachi and whose love for all living beings are but contagious. I profusely thank Almighty God for his blessings that along our different paths through the intervening decades the Almighty has lead us, we have come together for publishing this great work.

The book, an outcome of divine inspiration drawn from author's Guruji, Swami Akhandananda Sarwaswati, is sure to change how you feel about yourself, your life, and the world around you. It has been author's long cherished desire to succinctly outline and explain in simple terms Vedic philosophy for readers of all ages. Amidst our frantic world, pressured

by expectations, demands, ambitions and desires, book's powerful messages are as comforting as a silent night under a starry sky.

Swami Akhandanand Saraswati, known to be a great religious teacher, experienced the spiritual truths, the goal of the Vedic path, and showed the way to those who enquired.

No matter what we see outside, we only see the reflection. The reflection of what we carry inside. This reader-friendly book gives us the reflection of what we carry inside.

This book is a must for one and all who wish to live life with passion and purpose, and who has at some time or another experienced the inevitable conflicts that life subjects us to. May all attain bliss!

Harshvardhan Neotia
Chairman
Ambuja Neotia Group.
June 2018.

Where am I?

According to the Vedic philosophy, the Atma is always pure. We do wrong because we identify with our body and develop a subtle subconscious ego, called '*ahankaara*', and this gives birth to individuality, which is separate and different from other individual beings and external factors. Realization is the state when an individual is able to cast off this subtle ego, and identify with the Atma – the universal Soul, or the Paramatma of all.

Obviously, this is not easy to achieve. The Vedic philosophy does not blame a Devil or Satan for the wrongs of the world. It blames the ignorance (or nescience) in the individual for their behavior.

It is also believed that Prakriti (the Lord's power of creation and illusion, which is not separate from Him, but is required for duality – and Creation – to be possible) pushes everything upwards, to a higher level. (Without the use of Prakriti, also called Maya, the Brahman remains one and indivisible, without form and without attributes!) This is obvious in the plants which rise towards the sun. Human beings also have an urge for inner and outer enhancement. Since all the five sense organs face outwards, we are inclined to consider the outer world real. It is only when the intellect is refined that a person turns inwards and seeks to improve the inner life. This is why human beings are considered to be at a higher level than animals, even though we are physically inferior to them in many ways.

There is a popular saying, 'Man is the only animal that blushes, and needs to.' This is accepted by the Vedic philosophy, because the human species is called the '*karma yoni*' (the species which does karma; that is, is open to sin and merit which result from our motives and actions) whereas other species are called the '*bhoga yoni*' (the species that only experience). When a human being drops below the level of the eternal values, he is considered a '*jantu*' (creature), not a '*manushya*' (human being)!

So, let's see which level we are at:

- 4: Downright nasty, egoistic, self-centered, takes pleasure in hurting and harming others. The bane of society.
- 3: Cunning, with a streak of cruelty, inclined to strong prejudice and partiality. Makes wrong use of his sharp intelligence to manipulate and gain power. The dregs of society.
- 2: Dull, lethargic, lives like a tortoise – the laggards of every society.
- 1: Selfish, smart, inclined to lie and cheat for petty benefits, fox-like. Today's smart Alec.

0: Ordinary, average human with a herd mentality. Self-centered, lacks the courage or drive to extend himself to help or harm beyond a point. Pleasant and easy going; content to live and let live.

+ 1: Affectionate, helpful, tolerant and content – the slightly better human being.

+ 2: Energetic and proactive, socially aware, and a good organizer. Inclined to place self-interest before the cause. The average social worker.

+ 3: Passionately idealistic. Ready to go all out for a cause, even to the extent of being irrational and irresponsible.

+ 4: Intelligent, balanced, highly integrated, with an acute awareness of what is ethical and what is not. Is most effective in bringing social awareness and raising ethical attitudes in society.

Only an introspective person will be inclined to think about his inner level; and only an introspective person will have the urge to be a better person. Thus, only an introspective person is likely to find happiness. This brings us to the conclusion that introspective people are Graced, because unless there is an urge for progress, it is highly unlikely that there will be any progress.

Lewis Carroll's 'Alice In Wonderland' contains subtle metaphysical messages that people rarely notice. One example, eminently relevant here, is when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, 'Where will this road take me to?'

‘Where do you want to go?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered.

‘Then it hardly matters where the road takes you,’ he said.

Introspection can become a burden if not handled in the right way. Like any other faculty, it has to be channeled properly, if it is to bring the desired benefits, otherwise it will lead to our developing an inferiority complex, or – worse – a kind of glorified sense of shame.

We all have our strengths and weaknesses, our scarcely acknowledged fears and drives. The first thing we need to do is to face the facts without shame or pride.

The second step is to weed out the undesirable from the desirable, and the obvious third step is to achieve this intelligently and effectively.

We may as well admit that there are no short cuts, nor is there any guarantee of total success. Having faced that, we must keep our mind on the goal, with the faith that since it is the good before us, it must and will come.

Our Shastras use a beautiful phrase ‘*Laalaye` chitta baalakam`*’. That means, our mind is like a little child. We have to lead it gently and lovingly, away from the potentially dangerous and towards the definitely beneficial. Clamping down ruthlessly will create a repercussion that may be worse than the minor aberrations we wish to curtail. The motive is not to deaden the baser instincts; it is to divert them so they help us reach our goal.

The goal, for every being, is happiness, peace, and security. So, we have to find out what are the factors that hinder us. It is childish and destructive to think that anyone who stops us from doing what we want is an enemy, and can be removed with impunity. This attitude is more dangerous for the future of mankind, than the global warming, sweet water scarcity, and other environmental disasters that loom threateningly. All the problems in the world today have been created because of man’s greed for more.

We have to change the concept that if something is good, more of it is better, because ‘more’ is unending. The desire for more can never be quenched; only the object of desire keeps changing.

The Gita has simplified the factors that lead us to dissatisfaction and damnation. They are, *kaama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), and *lobha* (greed). Desire, when thwarted, leads to anger. If indulged, it leads to greed. Desires are natural and they are necessary to motivate us to improve our lives and be happy. They are like the nuclear power that can light up a thousand homes, or blow up a town. So, we have to make sure that the one who uses such power is not a destructive person. That person is you, it is me, it is every individual. And, it is well to remember that whatever way we use it, it will affect us more than it will affect anyone else, in the long run.

So, if we are really interested in achieving a life of enduring happiness, serenity and security, we have to understand the effects of our attitudes and actions. The tips given by our Sages of yore are simple and profound, and well worth considering.

My Religion And Me.

Orthodox ritualism is generally irritating for most of us who have a modern upbringing, and I am no exception! Added to this is the fact that we are told that we should follow the ancient customs, without being given any valid, logical reason for doing so. This tends to put us off religion altogether.

The thing I like most about the philosophy of what is generally known as Hinduism is that neither does it reject or condemn anyone, nor does it oppose the use of logic and intelligence. In fact, the universal respect in which the Bhagwat Gita is held is because it advocates the active use of intelligence, and clarifies how spirituality and rationale go hand in hand. The correct name for Hinduism is the Sanatan Dharma. Sanatan means eternal, and Dharma means religion. One could say that all religions are eternal, so why should only Hinduism be called the Sanatan Dharma? The difference between other religions and the Sanatan Dharma is that other religions – as we know them – were all started by a Historical figure in recorded time, whereas nobody knows who founded the Sanatan Dharma, or when it was founded. The Sanatan Dharma has no beginning and no end. It is the eternal righteousness for humans at every point in time, in every place on earth, and for every individual. This is why it is said that Hinduism is not a religion; it is a philosophy; it is a way of life, and it has scope for every human being.

There are innumerable texts and works, but the Vedas are generally understood to contain the quintessence of Hinduism, as we will call it for the sake of convenience. Nobody knows who wrote the Vedas, or when, but their being separated into four parts is generally accredited to the Sage Krishna Dvaipayana, who has been called Veda Vyasa because of this remarkable feat. Veda Vyasa is also considered to be an *anshaavatara* (partial Avatar) of Vishnu, and the Vedas are called '*apaurusheya vaani*' (not spoken by a human). After writing the four main Vedas – the Rig Veda, Atharva Veda, Sama Veda, and Yajur Veda

– he proceeded to write the Mahabharata and the eighteen Puranas. The Bhagwat Gita is a part of the Mahabharata, and the Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana (pronounced *bhaagwat puraana*) is considered to propound bhakti at the highest level.

The Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana gives a remarkable definition of what we generally call God – it says, ‘*satyam param dheemahi*’. ‘The highest is the Truth’. This leaves no scope for petty wrangling! Not even an atheist will deny the desirability of Truth! Nor can anyone say that the Ultimate Truth is not the human goal, because truth is one of the essential components of an enduring happiness – and enduring happiness is what every creature seeks. It needs no elaborate explanations to make anyone agree that happiness will not be enduring, if it is based on an untruth.

The prime position held by the Shrimad Bhagwat by Vaishnavas (those who worship the Almighty as Vishnu), is due to the fact that it is considered the *vaangmaya* (verbal) form of the Lord Shri Krishna. Shri Krishna is considered the ‘*poorna avataara*’ – the complete manifestation of the Brahman. The Bhagwat is set at the end of the Mahabharata, and describes the departure of Shri Krishna from the world. In it, Shri Krishna consoles His devotee, Uddhava, by saying that He will always be available for His devotees in the form of the Bhagwat. In the words of Shri Satyanandji Maharaj (Founder of the Bihar School of Yoga at Munger), the Gita is the essence of the Upanishads, and the Bhagwat is the commentary of the Gita. The Upanishads, by the way, are the essence of the Vedas. They are called the Gnan Kand (the portion of Gnan). The Vedas contain three main sections: The *Karma Kaanda* (ritual worship for worldly gain), *Upaasanaa Kaanda* (devotional worship), and *Gnaana Kaanda* (the Knowledge of the Vedas). It is said that 60% of the Vedas are of Karma Kand, 36% of Upasana Kand and only 4% are of Gnan Kand. This is believed to be an indication of the proportion of human temperaments!

The Supreme is described as a feminine Shakti (power), which is the illusionary and creative power of the Lord with attributes. The Lord with attributes is called the Ishwara, and manifests as Rama, Krishna, and in

other forms. He is the sustainer of the universe that is created by Brahma (who is different from the absolute Brahman), or Shiva, the Lord of destruction and dissolution. The Brahman is without form and without attributes, and is considered a neutral gender. The non-dual Brahman splits into three forces, in order to create. The three forms – Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh – have their feminine powers as their consorts, their shaktis; and the shakti of the *shaktimaan* (the one who has the power) is inseparable from the shaktiman. This beautiful arrangement leaves no scope for chauvinism, or feminism, because the two are complimentary and supplementary to each other. I consider this to be an example for all couples who find it difficult to strike the right balance.

Saraswati is the goddess of learning, and considered to be the consort of Brahma, though actually it is Savitri who is Brhama's consort. It is obvious that anyone who wants to create something must have the requisite knowledge. Mythology says that Brahma created Saraswati and fell in love with her. Considered in human terms, it sounds shocking that a father should fall in love with, and marry his own daughter. This is a typical example of the message given by mythology, that every mythological story carries a subtle message. The message here seems to be that we tend to fall in love with what we consider to be 'my creation'. It may be the fierce possessiveness and pride for a child – we all know how ambitious parents can be for their offspring! Or, it could be the feeling for almost anything, starting from a pudding to a painting, piece of embroidery to architecture. The fact is that it is human nature to bask in appreciation and resent criticism for what we have done. This mythology warns us about this tendency, and guides us about using it constructively.

The world – and all creatures in it – is moved by three tendencies, called '*guna*'s. They are the Sattva Guna (the lofty tendency where truth, brightness and knowledge predominate), the Rajo Guna (the mixed tendencies that prod us into activity and agitation) and the Tamo Guna (the tendencies of sloth, dullness, and faulty thinking). They are called the three gunas of Prakriti – the power of creation and illusion. Brahma is dominated by Rajo Guna – symbolized by the color red – to be able to

create. Vishnu is dominated by Sattva Guna, symbolized by white – in order to sustain, and Shiva dominated by Tamo Guna – symbolized by dark grey – to be able to destroy. Paradoxically Vishnu is represented as blue-hued, while Shiva has a fair complexion. All three are the powers of the Brahman, and considered to be equal, although only Vishnu and Shiva are worshipped generally, as Devtas. (Only Narayana and Shiva are worshipped as the Brahman.)

It seems to me that the selfishness of the human nature is revealed by this. We tend to forget our Creator, and bother only about appeasing the factors which help us to sustain ourselves, or to pray for liberation, since Vishnu sustains and Shiva destroys. Actually, what Shiva destroys is the nescience; the animalism; the tendencies that make us lesser than a man (by man I indicate the species, not the sex). What Vishnu sustains is the qualities that make us worthy of our birth as human beings, and all that is best in human thought and effort.

As mentioned before, the consort of Brahma is Saraswati, the goddess of learning. The consort of Vishnu is Laxmi, the goddess of prosperity and grace. It is obvious that prosperity is an essential component for sustenance! Parvati is the consort of Shiva, and – like all other gods and goddesses – has many names. She is considered to be the most powerful of the three, and the primary moving force of the world. The Devi (goddess) aspect of the Supreme is a combination of all the divine powers described in the feminine form.

Parvati, or Jagadamba, or Bhuvaneshwari is the primordial Shakti. She is also worshipped in her own right, as the Brahman with form.

Scope is thus given to people to worship whichever aspect (or form) that strikes a chord in their subconscious. It cannot be denied that every person has an individual concept of the ‘power’ that rules the universe. It is an instinctive and basic need of humans to have reverence for a ‘higher power’. Ancient cults worshipped Nature, or gods depicting natural forces. Swamiji used to say that it is a natural instinct to worship God in our own image. I suspect that is because of an innate conviction that we are the most superior species, and also because we unconsciously identify with the Atma. Beyond the human species will be

the formless absolute, but the formless absolute is rather remote and impersonal, hence the popularity of a God (or Son of God) with form. The Hindu scriptures give scope for the higher power to be worshipped as the formless absolute, as the feminine concept of Shakti, or the male concept of Shiva or Vishnu, depending on the individual temperament.

The subject of vegetarianism and human or animal sacrifice has recently been an issue of considerable controversy. Human sacrifice is as unconceivable in today's world, as cannibalism, but it is a fact that both were accepted in the past. Even animal sacrifice is unacceptable to the Vaishnav Sect. The Bhagwat states unequivocally, that animal sacrifice is to be shunned. It may bring quick worldly benefits, but it is sinful, and the individual soul – *jeeva* – which is what is reborn, has to suffer to pay for this 'bribed' benefit.

It is a little shocking for the rigid Vaishnavs that meat eating and drinking were common practices. This is mentioned in the Valmiki Ramayana, Mahabharata and many of the Puranas. My son – at the age of eight – was also quite shocked at this. He asked Swami Akhandananda Saraswati (my Guru and his) that when Shri Rama ran after the deer, it meant He would eat meat. Swamiji did not deny it. Nor did he avoid answering (like many I have come across). He explained that in those days, the availability of grain was uncertain. The Kshatriyas (warrior class) had to hunt, both for sharpening their archery skills, and to eat meat to sustain themselves when at war. The urge to eat meat and drink wine is, perhaps, a legacy from prehistoric times. It must have been similar to our having a cup of coffee when we are tired or mentally dull. There is no doubt that meat is nourishing and habit forming. The sages recommend avoiding it on the grounds that it is *taamasik* (full of Tamo guna) food. The mental and physical pain of the animal killed lingers in the meat, and has its affect on the one who eats it. According to the theory of Karma we suffer to pay for the suffering we cause. This is perfectly in keeping with Newton's theory about everything having its equal and opposite reaction. It is also reminiscent of the words 'from dust we come and to dust we return' – which indicates that everything is not only impermanent, but everything has a common source and a

common end. One Mahatma has said, ‘There is, ultimately, only grass and flesh. Grass turns into flesh, and flesh turns into grass in a continuous process.’

The Shaktas are worshippers of the Devi – Shakti – by any of Her names. They practice animal sacrifice, either for propitiating the goddess, or for worldly boons. I had asked Krishna Shankar Shastri how God could be pleased with an act of cruelty. The very fact was inconceivable, but the practice continues to be popular because ‘it works’! Shastriji explained that the seemingly miraculous boons are not granted by the Almighty, but by one of the petty powers. Their power also comes from the Supreme, but it is something like a Government clerk taking ‘speed money’ to pass a file!

My Swamiji said that the Supreme Power was like electricity. Power can be used constructively or destructively, and sometimes the instrument is faulty, with disastrous results. As I understand it, the highest power is spiritual power – unseen, unknown and immeasurable. It is like an invisible nuclear station which can be tapped by those who attain the ability through asceticism. Like a master computer which can be accessed by persons having the requisite password for the different levels of data. Ravana and Kansa, Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaaksha, Bhaumaasura and Jarasandha are typical examples of asceticism being used for personal benefit. The boons given to them are invariably either from Brahma, or from Shiva. As the sustainer of the world, Vishnu can’t afford to give boons to any destructive power! He is the one who descends to destroy the demons, although the Siva Purana has stories about Shiva’s Avatars, too. Demons are, as I understand it, the symbols of negative power; or – in other words – strength (whether it be political power, wealth, or physical strength) used destructively.

The Shaivites worship the Brahman as Shiva. Shiva is often called ‘Bhole’ Baba’, because He is easily pleased and generous in granting boons. Whereas Vishnu is always richly dressed with many ornaments, Shiva wears a tiger skin, has matted locks, wears snakes around His neck, arms and wrists, and uses an old bull – Nandi – to ride on. Shiva’s abode is the cremation grounds, and ash is smeared on His body. The

significance is that the world is a graveyard; all creatures are walking ghosts, and the only eternal Truth is the Shiva, the pure and auspicious reality. It is natural that His consort is Parvati, as She destroys evil and nescience.

There are five main Sects in Hinduism. They are the Vaishnav, Shaiva, Ganapatya, Saurya and Shakta. We have already discussed the Vaishnavs, Shaivites and Shaktas in brief. Ganapati is the son of Shiva and Parvati. He is the remover of obstacles, and bestows worldly boons. He has the head of an elephant, and is considered a form of Vishnu. He is the first to be worshipped at the start of any auspicious endeavor. The worshippers of Ganesha are called ‘Ganapatyas’.

The Saurya Sect worship the Sun – Surya – as Vishnu, because it is the Sun that gives us life, food, and (inner and outer) illumination. He is the Lord’s visible form. There are many other, smaller Sects, and the interested reader can get the information about these from other, more knowledgeable works. The purpose of this book is not to go into complicated details, but to present the wider concept of the Vedic philosophy.

The concept of Karma – as opposed to the concept of *praarabdha* (fate or destiny caused by past deeds) – is confusing even for many who are born and brought up in a traditional Hindu family. The law of Karma states that all actions give a proportionate fruit at the appropriate time. The only way to escape this law is to offer up all actions, and also their fruits, to the Lord. Otherwise, the cycle of rebirth will continue endlessly. Bad actions send the jeeva (the individual soul attached to a body) to Hell (Narak), and good actions send it to Heaven (Swarga). Both these are temporary abodes, and the jeeva is reborn in a body given as per the last urge it had, at the moment of death. For example, a person whose last impulse was to eat some fruit may be born as a worm in a similar fruit. Or, it could be given the body of a hawk, if its last impulse was to eat meat. A pious jeeva would be born as a son in a noble family, whereas a person who had done lots of *daana* (charity) will be born into a family of great wealth. Although there are many who are not convinced that life continues after death, this theory is logical and

satisfying to people like myself, who can think of no other explanation for the inequity we see all around, and are unable to accept that God can be cruel, whimsical, and unjust.

Prarabdha can be called ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’. It is an accumulation of the fruits of karmas of several lives, and portions of it are used by the Lord for every creature in every life. Lazy people use prarabdha as an excuse to avoid putting in an honest effort, but this is criticized strongly in the scriptures. In fact, my Swamiji used to say that prarabdha is to be used as a concept to explain misfortunes or failures to people who are not mentally equipped to go into the depths of our philosophy. The Gita strongly advocates ‘Purushartha’ (human endeavor) as a duty for all human beings, to progress towards their goals – whether the goals are worldly, or otherworldly, or spiritual. However, we will discuss the Gita a little later, in greater detail.

The Ultimate Absolute (which can be called God or the Brahman) is referred to as Sacchidananda. Sat = existence, + Chit = consciousness, + Ananda = bliss. This is the ultimate goal and ultimate achievement, and the secret of eternity. Sat is commonly translated as pure existence, or the ultimate Truth. Truth, however, contains subtle connotations, because in worldly interaction truth can – and often is – relative. At a crux, I would say that Sat is that which cannot be negated, whether it is the Brahman, or the Atma. It is the ultimate Reality. The Vedas explain it as ‘*ne`ti, ne`ti*’ – not this, not this. A wave is real, but it is so fleeting that it cannot be ‘Sat’. The Atma attached to a body is called a *jeeva*. It is housed temporarily in an individual form, so it cannot be called Sat until it merges into the one Atma of all. These are just two examples, which give the general idea as to the innate indication whenever the word ‘Sat’ is used.

Chit can be translated broadly as consciousness or awareness. It is the presence (or power) of the Chit Shakti (pure consciousness) which makes the difference between the animate and the inanimate. Even among the animate, it is only the human species that have the potential to attain their *chit-swaroopa* – their essence, which is pure consciousness. Needless to say, this pristine consciousness is totally

unbiased; quite different from ordinary awareness which is filled with personal considerations and individual points of view.

Ananda is pristine bliss. It is unsullied joy, which has no connection with any of the worldly experiences that are commonly understood as joy or happiness in our little world of affections and aversions.

Sacchidananda can be easily understood if you think, 'I exist, therefore I know; I know, therefore I experience bliss.'

This little sentence conveys the purpose of human life – to obtain *ananda*. It is happiness that all creatures seek. We are unhappy because we never seem to be able to hold on to happiness, even if we find it for a brief duration of time. The reason is that we are deluded by Maya – the Lord's power of illusion and creation. Maya binds us with the three gunas (inborn tendencies) of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Maya is also called Prakriti (Mother Nature), the Lord's power of Creation. There are two kinds of Maya Shakti – the Vidya Maya that bestows wisdom and helps a person progress spiritually, and there is Avidya Maya, that causes delusion and plunges a person deeper into the morass of the world. Maya works with the three gunas (tendencies), Sattva, Rajas and Tamas.

Sattva, the lofty tendency, is filled with noble aspirations, goodwill and wisdom. Rajas is a mixture of lofty tendencies, desires, and restlessness. Tamas is when the mind is dull, base, and deluded.

These three gunas are the controlling forces of the world, and all beings. They are in a constant state of flux, vying for supremacy, with one slipping imperceptibly into another unless the individual is vigilant enough to check the downward trend.

The highest goal – of experiencing the essence of the ultimate Truth, Knowledge and Bliss; Sacchidananda – can be achieved when a person is able to overcome the influence of the three gunas. The Sage Atri (a + tri = not three) signifies this level of spiritual attainment. His wife is Anasuya (the meaning of Anasuya is one who does not find fault). This couple is revered even by the Lord, Shri Rama and Sitaji, when they meet Atri and Anasuyaji during their fourteen year banishment to the

forest. There is also a story about Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (Shankarji) being born as the sons of Atri and Anasuya.

It is interesting to understand the magnificent and magnanimous benevolence of rejecting the concept of evil, or a Devil. The war between goodness and wickedness is a part of life, but by placing the blame on the gunas, it leaves scope for the worst of people (with demoniac tendencies) to turn into better people, and warns the noblest of people to beware, lest they fall from the path of goodness. This perception, that all we see as wrong in this world – including the injustice in our own lives, and when misfortune strikes out of the blue – allows for the comfort of some hope for the future, and the faith that we are not in the hands of some irrational force which will destroy us completely.

One may ask, ‘Why is Maya/Prakriti needed at all?’ It is because the world cannot exist without dualism. Mythology simplifies the process of Creation, through the story of the Lord as Narayana, or Maha Vishnu (in whom the three Devtas Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh are contained), lying on a bed of the coiled serpent Anant (anant means endless, and is also one of the names of the Lord), who bears the earth upon his head, and floats on the ‘*ksheersagar*’ – the milky ocean. White stands for purity, and the inferred sweetness indicates bliss. Well, the Lord Narayana (who lives in the heart of all creatures, and – as Vishnu – pervades all there is) was sleeping on the serpent Anant. He was alone. Only He was. Nothing else existed. A lotus stem grew from His naval (the sky is the naval of the Lord), and Brahmaji was in the lotus. The lotus is a symbol of purity. It arises from the earth, but is untouched by the mud or the water. Brahmaji looked all around, and could see nothing. He wondered why he was created. After meditating upon the possible reason, he heard the word ‘*tapa*’ repeated. Tapa means asceticism. He understood that he was to undertake asceticism.

To my mind, this is a parallel. As we grow, we begin to wonder why we are in the world. The answer is not provided on a platter. We have to go through a degree of mental and physical labor, before we get a glimpse of our *raison d’etre*.

This image of Narayana symbolizes the mind of a human being, which is called ‘naar’; and ‘ayan’ means the place of residence. The Lord abides in all creatures. He sleeps peacefully, until it is time for Creation. Then He summons His Power of Creation – Prakriti, Maya, Shakti – and Brahmaji emerges from His navel. The task of Creation is given to Brahmaji. After Brahmaji has done ‘tapa’, he is told by Narayana that his task is to create the world.

Brahmaji’s first reaction is to pray to the Lord, asking for Grace, so that he (Brahmaji) should never develop any vanity, thinking that it is he who has created the world. He wants to ensure that he never forgets that he is merely an instrument of the Lord Narayana, and that it is the Lord’s power that enables him to create the world.

And, we think it is ‘I’ who did such and such!! We get attached to what we feel is ‘mine’, and get upset if anyone is critical about it! How good it would be, if we could remember Brahmaji’s prayer, and abdicate our claim to what ‘I’ have done!

Even for the atheist, or the non-believer, this message is valuable, because the actual Creator symbolizes the creative power of a human being. The Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung has spoken of ‘the collective unconscious’ that can be tapped by any person having the requisite sensitivity. The theory that the Atma (the soul in the individual) and the Brahman (Universal soul) are one, lays to rest any rigid dogma about a Godhead, that can be misinterpreted or misused. That the universe is ruled by a most intricate and precise mechanism is a fact that cannot be disputed. The dispute is whether that mechanism is an Almighty, arbitrary power, or whether it is by the laws of Nature. Now, if Nature is represented by the concept of Prakriti, how does it harm us in any way?

The harm is that men use concepts for self gain, by promoting superstition and malpractices in the name of religion. It is ironic that the so-called ‘men of God’ have done more to alienate people from accepting the existence of a higher power that is both benevolent and rational, than any other group. People have the tendency to interpret the scriptures in a way that will confirm their own opinion. Since the

interests and understanding of different people are bound to differ, this leads to clashes, with each one becoming more and more dogmatic in the stance they choose to take.

My Guruji often pointed out the need to keep our focus on what an unbiased, rational, benevolent parent would expect of his quarreling children. ‘How do we know which are the words of God, or which thoughts are sent by Him? If it helps all creatures, it is Godly. If it helps only a particular individual or group, then it is prompted by a vested interest.’

So, the strife we see all around – that claims to have religion as its base – could be avoided (or at least contained) if we could apply this formula before we get carried away by the rhetoric of any fundamentalist. Our conscience is the voice of the Lord within. It tells us clearly what is wrong and what is right. We misuse our intelligence when we stifle this inner voice by using clever arguments to justify what we are inclined to do – and, if we need to justify wrong through logic, then it is a clear indication that our inclinations are wrong!

Freud pointed out the drastic effects of suppressing our desires. The consequences of allowing our inclinations to be fulfilled indiscriminately are even more drastic, and are seen all around. Then, what is the answer?

The answer given by our scriptures is simple, but not easy. The solution lies in reducing desires. Not all at once, and not even all of them at first, but gradually and wisely, without imposing a strain that results in adverse reactions. The Gita spells out the method in a masterly manner, but other scriptures also say the same thing. ‘Use discrimination. Transfer the desire to a spiritually enhancing object. Shift your focus from what you want to get, to what you can do to make the world a better place.’

The Sanskrit word for sin is *paapa*, and the word for spiritual merit is *punya*. Papa is defined thus: that which causes your (or another’s) downfall, is papa. Punya is what raises you (or another) to a loftier level. Hinduism is ‘*hita-pradhaana*’. The action is evaluated according to the motive. A surgeon will not incur sin, if the surgery fails to save the

patient's life, but a murderer will definitely incur sin for killing the person he knifes. Yamaraj is the Devta (presiding deity) of death. When a person dies, the jeeva is taken to Yamapuri (the land of Yama). Chitragupta is the Officer in Charge, and he reads out all the good and bad deeds of the person. Chitragupta abides in every person – we can consider him to be the unseen witness, our own mind. He records all that we do; even things which we forget we have done. Yamaraj then gives his verdict. Yamaraj is also known as Dharmaraj – the King of Dharma, and his justice is in keeping with the scriptures. He gives the jeeva a choice, asking the soul whether he would prefer to reap the fruit of his merit first, or work out the suffering which is the result of his sins, before being reborn.

Even for the worst sinner, there is hope of working out our sins and making a fresh start. And, even for an enlightened Sage, there is the possibility of falling, if ego, desire, or partiality/prejudice arise. The deeds and desires of the previous birth decide the next birth. Punya is carried forward as good fortune, and papa in the form of suffering. Very often we see people who are fabulously rich, good looking and intelligent. Yet they suffer – either physically, or mentally. We also see the reverse, when we see poor or physically challenged people live fruitful lives and radiate joy and goodwill. The carrying forward gives a logical explanation for the inexplicable inequities we see all around us.

This theory also gives some rationale for untimely deaths, and deformities in infants. A person's normal life span is supposed to be a hundred years. If he dies before his allotted time is up, he is reborn to complete the remaining years.

Another common fallacy is dispelled when we understand that good deeds do not cancel the effect of bad ones. The life of every being is a mixture of good and bad times. This understanding not only acts as a disincentive for wrong doing, it also warns us that we mustn't indulge in wrong doing with the belief that we will negate the effect by doing good deeds. We get courage that bad times will pass, and we are restrained from losing our head when good times come. This brings equanimity into our lives. It helps us remember that everything is transient, and that

we are the creators of our own misfortunes, so we had rather improve our future than worsen it by blaming, hating, and harming others in our anger and frustration.

Questions that come to mind

- Why are there so many gods and goddesses in the Hindu religion?

Hinduism is a philosophy that takes into consideration every kind of need of every kind of person. Different people are drawn to different images of the Almighty. The purpose of depicting the one power in many forms is two-fold. One is that each person is able to choose the image he feels reverence for. Even dacoits and criminals pray for success when they go to rob people! This sounds laughable, but it has the virtue of allowing them to continue to believe in a higher power, and this belief will, some day, lead to their conscience troubling them, or to amend their ways because they fear the Hell a sinner goes to after death. This scope is lost to atheists, who believe neither in a higher power, nor in Heaven or Hell after death, nor in rebirth when they pay for their deeds.

The other purpose is that the Vedic philosophy believes that the one, indivisible Brahman is the stuff the world is made of. The Brahman appears as all the Devis (goddesses) and Devtas (demi-gods). The Brahman is the substratum of all the beings on earth, the elements and everything that exists. Unity in diversity is symbolized by the Brahman. The scriptures say that there are 330 million Devtas! Even an uneducated person will understand the concept of the One in the many, when he hears this since early childhood.

This presentation of the one All-pervading pPower that not only rules over but also abides in all, and is everything that exists, removes scope for religious dogma and fighting over differences in the name of God. Nobody will deny that God has powers. The gods and goddesses are representations of the Lord's different powers. For example, Laxmi symbolizes prosperity and Grace. Durga symbolizes well-being and the power to destroy the wicked. Saraswati symbolizes the intellect and the artistic talents. Yama is the Devta of Death – he is feared only by wrongdoers. All the senses have their presiding deities that are the demigods of the elements. Fire is the

presiding deity of speech; the wind is the presiding deity of touch; the sun of vision; the water of taste; and space of sound.

The nice part is that even Demons are considered to be sons of Brahma the Creator. They represent the lowly tendencies in people. The Lord supports the Devtas in their endless fight against the Asuras (the Demonic races), and it is significant that sometimes it is the Asuras who emerge victorious, because even amongst them there are many powerful Kings who are devotees of the Lord and have received their power from the same source as the Devtas! It is the parallel of the constant inner battle in every person, when our higher tendencies battle with lowly ones. It gives us hope that good will prevail again, even when we succumb to our base impulses, and we do not succumb to despair or hopelessness.

The Gita states clearly that every special quality has the power of the Lord behind it. So, when we see someone with outstanding qualities, we feel respect instead of feeling envy. There is an unconscious feeling at the back of the mind that since God is in all, we can also get help when we need it; get good qualities if we work and pray for them; and if we don't get them, it is because God has a reason.

This amazing psychology needs to be understood, for people to get the benefits. Those who scoff at it without giving serious thought, are like the children who choose chocolates covered with gold paper instead of a gold coin!

- Apart from the many gods and goddesses, why are people, animals, plants and the elements also worshipped?

The father, mother, Guru, Saints, and ancestors are worshipped, and the reason is simple. The father's seed and the mother's blood, care and love give us life. The Guru gives a spiritual life and wisdom that makes life worthwhile. The Saints give us metaphysical blessings. They are the Lord's representatives on earth and have only goodwill for all. They are role models of compassion, fortitude, forgiveness, and benevolence. The sight of a Saintly person makes us feel humble

and reverent. This helps to reduce the vanity and arrogance in us. Seeing how a Monk is happy without any worldly possessions or worldly attachments makes us realize that happiness is a state of mind, unconnected with worldly objects. Ancestor worship gives us the faith that the soul is eternal, and the spirit of our ancestors is watching over us. This helps us overcome our fear of death.

Among the animals, the cow is worshipped because she symbolizes the mother. A cow gives milk, and love, and is gentle, and submissive. Everything in the cow benefits mankind. Her milk and milk byproducts, leather, horn, bones and flesh are all used by humans. Is it not proper that we value the help we get, and revere the giver? It is the same with trees. No human can compare to the benefits given by trees and plants to the whole world. Our very existence depends on them, and surely the sources of life are worthy of reverence and gratitude! The Ashwatha (wild fig) and Peepal (banyan) and Tulsi (balsam) are worshipped. They are watered every day, just as cows, crows, dogs, Sadhus and the fire are fed every day. These are symbolic of all trees, just as the cow symbolizes all animals.

A Yagya is a fire sacrifice, in which oblations are poured, as an offering to the demigods and elements. The Yagya is a ceremonial ritual that reminds us that all we have, is given by many factors, and if we wish to prosper, we must not only offer thanks, but also share some of what we have got, for the benefit of all. Any action done with this principle in mind becomes a Yagya. The *pancha mahaa-yagya* entails giving food every day (before eating) to cows, crows, dogs, the fire (with which we cook the food) and an uninvited guest or monk. This beautiful practice brings many beneficial traits into our lives. It makes us aware that every being has a right to get some benefit from the things we have, and it is our duty to extend this help – we are not doing anyone a favor by offering food to them! Nature, animals and society contribute to our welfare, and we should contribute to theirs. That is Yagya. We do it for our own future

benefit, and neglecting this duty will result in our losing some of our benefits.

When the Lord descended as Rama, Shiva also came to earth as Hanumanji, to help Him in His mission. This is why monkeys are revered even though they create a considerable nuisance. This is a reiteration of Shri Krishna's statement in the Gita that all exceptional qualities seen in anyone are a manifestation of the Lord's glory. (So, it is a foolish to feel proud about our good qualities.)

This practice also helps to convince us that the Brahman abides in all beings and everything in the world. The other message this gives is that when we do good, we get good; when we become selfish, self-centered and callous, we suffer. By giving comfort to another, a chain reaction is triggered, bringing comfort back to us ultimately. Feeding a hungry person or animal makes us forget our own needs for a while. We learn to share and sacrifice, because this pancha yagya (also called the *bhoota yagya*) is to be done by every householder even if they are poor and have very little food. We learn to carry out our stipulated duties even if we have to face hardship, and this strengthens our will power and self control. Will power and self control are invaluable assets in achieving worldly success, as well as spiritual progress.

Everything in the world is composed of the five elements – earth, water, fire, air, and space. Neither the world, nor any creature can exist without them. They symbolize divine powers, which can be called Prakriti (the Lord's power of Creation and illusion), or Mother Nature. The reason for their worship is obvious, and instinctive. The feeling of reverence for them also avoids social evils, seen so often these days; for example, unwanted parents, children, pets, and trees, or the reluctance to extend ourselves unselfishly.

Since the Vedas describe how the Brahman permeates everything that exists, the worship of elements is also the worship of the substratum of all that exists, including ourselves.

- Why does Vishnu take Avatars as a fish, tortoise, boar, and half-man half-lion?

In my opinion, the main reason is to make us understand that nothing is to be disdained, because God is in all beings. Another purpose is to indicate that all species are needed, and that all beings have their basic needs, just as we do. There is one theory that this is an indication of the process of evolution. First the fish living only in water, then the tortoise that can live on land and water, then a boar that lives only on land. The Narasimha Avatar, which has the head of a lion and the body of a man, indicates the development of civilization. The story is that the Demon Hiranyakashipu did a severe penance and asked for the boon of immortality. When Brahma the Creator told him that it was not possible to give this boon, since everything that is born must die, he asked for being indestructible by any human, god, animal, etc. He asked that he should not be killed in the day or night; not inside or outside; not by any weapon or anything that has life. He tried to be clever, like a lawyer, placing all possible clauses to become invincible. The Lord killed him on the doorstep, which was neither outside nor inside. He killed the Demon at dusk, which was neither day nor night. He killed him by ripping open his stomach with His claws, which were neither living nor inanimate matter. This tells us that we mustn't think that we can outwit God, or consider ourselves invincible.

The Demons are anti-God. They wreak havoc on good people. They symbolize all the bad tendencies of the human psyche, like anger, cruelty, lust, greed, sensual indulgences, and total unconcern for the suffering of others. To my mind, a person turns into a Demon when he allows these traits untrammelled freedom. The only power that can control these evil traits is the power of God, or the power of goodness, because I feel they are synonymous. The goodness in us is what keeps the badness in us controlled. If we pray earnestly, the latent wickedness in our nature will not be allowed to come into our lives. A prayer is a

desire that is expressed, and what we yearn for, is what we work towards.

The next Avatar is the Vaman (dwarf) Avatar. This can symbolize that man was not fully developed at the beginning of evolution. The story is that Aditi, the mother of the Devtas, pleaded with the Lord Vishnu (the preserver) to help Devtas regain their reign over the Kingdom of Heaven, since they had been conquered by the Demon King Bali. Now Bali was a just and pious King, even though he was a Demon. That indicates that even so-called bad people can have noble qualities. The Lord stated clearly that there was nothing that can be done to destroy a person who is on the right path. He would have to trick the Demon into giving Heaven to Indra, the King of the Devtas. So, He manifested as Vaman, a Brahmin boy, and went to Bali's Yagya as a supplicant. He asked for three foot-lengths of land, measured by His feet. When Bali took the pledge to grant this, the Lord assumed His Cosmic form. He measured the whole earth with one foot. His second foot covered the world Bali would get after death because of his pious deeds. Then He asked Bali where the third foot-length was to be placed. Bali, great soul and true devotee, offered his own head, for the third foot-length he had promised the Lord. 'Lord, I have given my possessions, but I have not given myself! Please take me, the ego of being an individual, and place Your foot on my head.' These words, coming from a Demon king, are deeply moving. They are a salutary lesson to those of us who have a false vanity about how pious we are! We need to learn from this Demon King, how to offer up not only all we have, but also our Self to Him, who we believe to be God, goodness, or the ruler; or the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Almighty. The Lord granted Heaven to Indra and gave Bali a land called Satal Loka, and became the guard of Bali's palace!

This story – like other stories from the Puranas, has another message. Indra is the King of the Devtas, and rules over Heaven. How often we say, 'I'm in Heaven', when we are satisfied and comfortable in every way. Heaven, in the Indian tradition, is a temporary state of physical bliss. Indra symbolizes the *indreeya* (senses) and the Devtas are the

presiding deities that give power to our senses and sense organs. They are at a metaphysical level of our existence; while Vishnu is at the deepest level of our being; He is our Atma, our indestructible soul.

The Lord comes as Parasurama after the Vaman Avatar, and destroys the Kings who had become unrighteous. One can almost hear Karl Marx say, 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely!' The Kings had strayed from their duty to protect justice and righteousness and ensure that society lives in peace and prosperity. Parasuram killed all the Kshtriya Kings on earth repeatedly, and established such a fear psychosis amongst the ruling kings that they did not dare to deviate from the path of justice. Even so, Parasuram depicted violence, and the Lord came as Rama, with His three brothers, to show how a righteous King should live and rule. The life of Rama indicated that for a King, his people are his object of worship, and no personal sacrifice is too great for the happiness of the people. Human nature being what it is, a common washer-man slandered Sita, the Lord's feminine counterpart. Rama sent her away to Valmiki's Ashram. This action has brought Him criticism down the ages, and in my opinion, it was done to establish how futile it is to appease stupid and malicious people, and make an innocent person suffer because of gossip. If we believe that Rama is the Lord incarnate, and Sita is His Shakti (power), they are inseparable, and the whole story is just an illustration, created to give a message and guide people regarding what Dharma (righteousness) is.

The fact that Rama's commitment to righteousness did not succeed in society becoming wholly noble and ethical probably made the Lord decide to come as the naughty Krishna who broke all rules! But, that is another story!

- Why is Krishna depicted as a thief, womanizer, unscrupulous politician and the destroyer of His own family?

All these are the result of fallacies that have grown due to people not understanding the significance behind the folk lore.

The sages hid profound truths in simple stories that even uneducated people would narrate to children generation after generation. This was at a time when few could read or write, or understand the secrets of spirituality/psychology/ metaphysics/ physics and other such sciences. Since the basic truth requires all these to be understood fully, the sages wrote the Vedas and other scriptures for the educated and intelligent people, and wrote the Puranas for the common people. The stories contained the essence of the truth, so that those with an adequate intelligence could get a glimmer of it even if they were uneducated. It also encouraged people to think for themselves, rationalize and discriminate between the plausible, impossible, likely and unrevealed.

Shri Krishna stole butter, when He was a little child. The butter signifies love. It signifies a heart that is tender and unsullied. The love in our heart is fulfilled when it is given to the Lord who also represents goodness, truth, compassion and love. At a lower level, the Demon King Kansa imposed heavy taxes on the cowherds, and they had to give him the milk products as tax, so the children were deprived of these items. This was Krishna's opposition to tyranny and injustice. At a third level, these were Krishna's antics to draw attention to Himself. He had enough butter in his own home; He didn't need to steal any, anyway – the gopis (cowherd women) were only too happy to give it to him! Stealing the butter was his *leelaa* – a frolic, a game played for fun. It enhanced the delight of the gopis and the childhood friends who participated in his pranks. At an even higher level, everything belongs to God, so how can He steal what already belongs to Him? And then, it is natural for children to steal their favorite foods when mothers prevent them from eating more than is healthy! One can also say this stealing was symbolic of stealing hearts. Krishna says, 'If you don't give Me your heart, I will steal it willy-nilly, by My antics!'

Krishna's love episodes with the gopis (rustic milkmaids) have the deepest mystical significance. Krishna is the Atma (universal soul) in all. The gopis are attracted to Krishna because the soul craves something higher. It is depicted as physical love because this is the highest pleasure

known to man. The purpose is to tell us that the union with the Divine is more blissful than the greatest pleasure we can imagine.

The first incident is when the gopis pray to the goddess Katyayani, asking that Shri Krishna becomes their husband. It is a month-long ritual, but even before the month is over, Shri Krishna assures them that their prayers are accepted and granted. This episode had shocked me when I first heard it. I was still a child. My grandmother grew angry at my logical questions about how right it was that God should steal the clothes of women who were bathing in the river, and force them to come out naked for Him to see! This reaction was repeated by so many that I decided that I would, one day, find the truth, and expose the facts, if I could. I got the answer from my Guruji, and write what I have understood for those who want to know.

Clothes hide our nakedness. Before God – or before our own soul – we have to expose the naked truth about what we are. No deceit and no half-truths will do. To reach enlightenment, to become eligible for knowing the secrets of the ultimate reality, we have to be prepared to give up our ego, which is also a kind of garment. We have to submit our mind and body unquestioningly.

Don't we look at our naked body without shame? God is no other! He is our own Self. Even if He comes in a human form, He is beyond considering us sex objects. His entire existence is on another plane – a plane that has no connection to worldly considerations.

In this episode, Shri Krishna has His friends with him. The gopis come, early morning, to bathe. They take off their clothes and enter the Yamuna. Shri Krishna takes their clothes and clambers onto a tree. He tells them that if they want their clothes, they must come out one by one and take them. This is Krishna's way of explaining that we are not the body; we are the Atma. The body is a garment we shed when this birth ends and a new one begins.

In those days, it was considered wrong to bathe naked in the river, lake or sea. Devtas dwell in the water, and it was considered disrespectful to remove all clothing. This is another, minor reason. Krishna was only about five years old. The fact that Krishna's friends were with Him

indicates that only those who have risen above physical considerations can be a part of the game of the Almighty. None of them saw the gopis as women; they saw only pure souls. I find it inexplicable that the modern mind can accept that there is nothing wrong in nudist colonies where people are encouraged to 'be themselves' and yet they see fit to express shock at an incident that has a profound deeper meaning!

The sound of Krishna's flute is irresistible for the gopis. That is the spiritual pull which has drawn every mystic in the world throughout history.

'Why only women?' you ask. 'Why not men, too?' Well, I assure you that it is not due to chauvinism! The Atma is here depicted as masculine gender for the sake of simplifying the subject, and the love in the heart is depicted as feminine gender for the same reason. Psychology has proved that women are more emotional than men, and have a greater need for emotional security. Hinduism makes no bones about depicting the Divine as an Almighty Goddess, or the neutral gender Absolute Brahman, so we can acquit the Scriptures of any gender bias!

Then comes the famous Raas Leela – the frolic of Krishna's dancing with the gopis. Sixteen thousand gopis danced with Shri Krishna in a divine frenzy. At first, Krishna was in the middle, encircled by tiers of gopis. Then, He manifested into many forms, and it was one Krishna with a gopi on each side. Then it became one gopi-one Krishna. The gopis are the thousands of urges in the human psyche`. When all our inclinations are for the Almighty only, then a soul meets the universal soul. Some say that there are sixteen thousand nerves in the body and that a mystic loves the Almighty with every nerve in his body. Some say that sixteen thousand is a mystical figure, and the meaning is that every individual has a personal concept of his/her personal object of devotion. Whatever it is, it is clear that the physical descriptions are mere symbols of the highest supra-normal ecstasy. Lastly, it is ridiculous to the extreme to think that one man can give satisfaction to sixteen thousand amorous women!

To clarify this beyond doubt, the text states that it was a challenge from Kama Deva (the presiding Deity of lust) to Krishna, and that Krishna

accepted the challenge to establish that He was unaffected by any physical titillations or allurements.

Swami Vivekananda said, 'If you are not ready to read the Raas Panchadhyayi (five chapters that describe the Raas Leela), don't read it!' People are deluded because they read these five chapters out of curiosity and do not see them in context with the rest of the text. Once, a Mahatma was asked by a man, 'If Krishna could dance with the gopis, why can't we dance with other peoples' wives?'

'Certainly you can,' replied the Mahatma, 'but you must first do the other things Krishna did. He lifted the Govardhan mountain on the little finger of His left hand. He danced on the hoods of the serpent Kaliya who had a hundred heads. He killed any number of demons, and showed divine powers that proved He was not just a human being. Do all these, and then nobody will object to your dancing.'

As for the accusation of Krishna being an unscrupulous politician, it must be noted that He openly declared his intentions on every occasion. This accusation is generally leveled at Krishna because during the Mahabharata war, He told Arjuna to shoot at Karna when Karna was unarmed. Karna questions Krishna, saying, 'You have descended on earth to establish Dharma (righteousness). Yet you are telling Arjuna to kill me when I am unarmed? What sort of righteousness is this?' Arjuna, himself, was unwilling to break the codes of ethics by shooting at an unarmed man. It was against the code of a warrior. Shri Krishna answers Karna with a counter question, 'Where was your Dharma, when the innocent Draupadi was being disrobed in public, and you sat silently and watched? Where was your Dharma when seven of you – established warriors – killed the young Abhimanyu, who was all alone? Where was your Dharma when you heard Duryodhan refuse to give the Pandavas even five villages, leave alone half the kingdom that was theirs by right? Adharma (that which is contrary to Dharma) begets adharma. Don't speak of Dharma to Me!' And Krishna tells Arjuna to go ahead and shoot.

Krishna is Bhagwan – the supreme Lord. The Bhagwan has six characteristics, called 'bhag'. They are, total Gnan, *vairaagya* (non-

attachment), prosperity, power, beauty and love. Krishna's life displays all these, and in His decision to destroy His own clan, He shows that what is important is not family loyalty, but the good of the world. Krishna came to destroy the forces of evil. He knew that His clan was too powerful to be destroyed by any other, and that this power would corrupt them. They had already begun to show signs of losing their sense of decorum. It was His gift to posterity that generations to come should keep the long term view of the greatest good, and not let personal partiality lead to protecting wrongdoers.

- Why does the Lord need to descend, or even have a form? How can God be an idol?

In my opinion, God doesn't need to do anything! He is supremely independent. Whatever He does, is out of compassion for all His children. The wrongdoing we see is of our own making, because in all His mercy, God has given us all we have and also the freedom to choose our actions and attitudes. Of course, this freedom carries a price tag – we have to 'pay' for the wrong things we do. It is like Newton's law of every action having its equal and opposite reaction; except that here, the reaction is not necessarily opposite; it is appropriate!

I think that we are not equipped to sit in judgment about what God should do, or know why He does what. If we have faith in a universal benevolent power, we should try to understand the benevolence behind things. How can puny man, with limited understanding and restricted vision hope to understand why the omniscient, supremely compassionate Almighty does things?

The fact is that we differ from person to person in what we respond to. While a formless Almighty is appealing to some, others need a form on which they can focus. Hinduism gives scope to all. We can worship the formless Brahman, or the form of a God, or Goddess, depending upon what is most conducive to reverence on a personal level. In fact, we can even worship the Almighty as the world, and serve the poor, the needy, the sick, animals, and Nature. Mother Teresa served the most wretched

of lepers and destitute beggars, with the feeling that she was serving the Christ in them. This is totally in keeping with the concept that everything is the Brahman, and that God exists in all beings. It may seem shocking, and it can be dangerous to practice this, but there is a form of worship in which the Almighty is worshipped in our own heart. It is called 'Ahamgrahopasana'. The practice entails purifying the mind and the body, and invoking the protection of the Devtas, so that the Demons (in the form of base tendencies or malevolent attitudes) do not enter the mind and disrupt the spiritual progress. The mantra 'Soham' (I am That) is chanted, to remind the person that he is not the gross or subtle body; he is the Atma; and the Atma is all-pervasive, and one in all.

Idols are symbols, as is a holy book, or the cross. They help us focus on the essence. They are reminders of what God expects from us, the blessings He has bestowed, and that He is always with us to help us at every step. The Lord Vishnu is also worshipped in the form of a round Shaligram stone, and Shiva is worshipped in an elliptical stone called the Narmadeshwara, as well. The stones are strewn in the beds and banks of the rivers Gandaki or Narmada, and people step on them and know that they are stones. When one is picked up and used as a symbol of the Lord for worship, it becomes special.

If, as modern science is beginning to understand, the basic substratum of creation is pure, indivisible energy, then there is no earthly reason why that energy cannot be in an idol, a plant, an animal, in a human, or in the elements, the planets, or anything and everything else in the world. It seems to me a kind of impudence to say that God 'can' be something, and 'cannot' be something. Who are we to limit Him according to our individual concepts?

Leave alone shapes, God is worshipped even in sound – the Aum! There are many meanings in the three letters that have a sound and the one letter that is silent, to indicate that the ultimate is indescribable. We need not go into that, because it is not pertinent to the question of why God is worshipped as idols.

The parents and the Guru are also worshipped, because they give life and the knowledge that gives meaning to life.

- Why does Hinduism stress on the women being subservient to their husbands?

According to Hinduism, the ultimate goal in life is to attain salvation from rebirth. For this, a person has to purify his subtle body and lead a simple, ethical life, carrying out the duties as per his status in life and his eligibility. A husband and wife are considered to be the two wheels of a chariot; each supporting the other and necessary for reaching the destination. The husband had his duties and the wife had hers. The nature of a man is generally dominant and detached, whereas the nature of a woman is basically loving, giving, and needing protection. The two are united mentally, physically and spiritually.

The conditions earlier were such that girls had to be protected at home, and boys were sent to the Guru's Ashram for getting discipline and learning. Women were trained at home, depending on the circumstances and emancipation of their society and family. For example, Kaikeyi drove the chariot of Dashrath in battle; Gargi and Maitree were very learned and spiritual.

To do one's duty as a worship of the Almighty was the teaching given to all. Maintaining harmony is essential for a successful marriage. Friction arises when interests clash. If the couple share a goal, have the same values, cooperate with each other, and respect each other as individuals, there would be no cause for friction. The woman was supposed to be the husband's companion in Dharma, and look after his needs so that he would be better able to fight the inner and outer battles of life. He was supposed to protect her, cherish her and look after all her needs. Half of her *punya* (spiritual merit) would go to him, and half of his would go to her. Thus, they shared a beautiful understanding and distribution of work towards a common goal.

Nobody asks why a soldier should give up his life in battle. Nobody asks why a man should face a tiger to protect his wife, or why a mother faces

a wild animal to protect her baby. So, why should the question of wifely duties be considered any different? The situation today is quite different, and it is foolish to expect the ancient traditions to remain unchanged. What remains unchanged, however, are the basic duties – or Dharma – of an individual. This brings us back to the question of what Dharma is. Each person's Dharma depends on what that person is identifying with at that time. If a soldier is on duty during a war, it is his Dharma to fight. If he is at home with his parents, it is his duty to look after their needs and show respectful affection. If he is visiting his Guru it is his duty to bow down and ask any spiritual questions he is perplexed by. If he is with his wife, it is his duty to give her his love and support in every way, ask her about her needs and see how the children are faring. If he is with his friend it is his duty to be friendly and helpful.

So, too, the duty of a woman is different towards her parents, towards her children, towards her husband and towards others in the family. Each has to prioritize and gauge which is the paramount duty at which point of time.

The Vedic ritual of marriage enjoins a man and a woman. The father of the bride gives his daughter to the groom. The bride is '*laxmisvaroopa*' – a form of Laxmi, the goddess of grace and prosperity. The bridegroom is '*vishnusvaroopa*' – a form of Lord Vishnu. Vishnu abides in all hearts. He sustains creation. The popular pictures of Laxmi-Vishnu depict Vishnu reposed on the serpent Anant, with Laxmi seated at His feet. Laxmi also stays on the chest of Vishnu, in the form of the little circle of golden hair, called the '*Shrivatsa*'. The indication is that wealth should serve the one who sustains the world, and a husband should cherish his wife. The indication of Laxmi serving Vishnu has been taken up, but the indication of Vishnu sustaining the world is overlooked. The wife should be supportive of her husband's efforts to reduce the suffering in the world, is the purport that has been twisted to suit chauvinistic interests.

There are many episodes in different scriptures that emphasize on the importance of women. The Valmiki Ramayana, especially shows women the highest respect. Valmiki has declared that the Ramayana is

an exposition of Sita's greatness. Sita is definitely an exemplary wife, but she has not hesitated to question Rama's actions, or decide to disdain his offer for her to return as Queen. When Rama and Sita go to the forest, they meet the famous sage Atri, and his devoted wife Anasuya. Anasuya is famous for the great powers, obtained by her intense devotion to her husband. Anasuya compliments Sita on her devotion to Rama. 'You left all the luxury and safety of your home,' she said. 'You left all your relatives and dear ones. That is very commendable.'

'What is so surprising in that?' asks Sita. 'Rama is not only my husband. He is also my friend, and lover. He looks after me like my father, and gives the affection of a brother. I miss nothing so long as I am with him.' This indicates what an ideal husband should be.

Also, in the marriage vows, Sita's father tells Rama, 'This is my daughter Sita. She will follow you like a shadow, in Dharma.' The unspoken indication is that she will not follow him in adharma – that, which is contrary to Dharma. So, the question of blind obedience is, I feel, something that has been added by vested interests later on. With the undeniable emphasis on righteousness, with the Atma of all beings declared to be one, and even animals having the same soul, it is inconceivable that Hinduism could sanction injustice to women.

Although both parents are to be worshipped, the mother has a greater right on the son than the father in our scriptures. Shankaracharya, the Teacher of Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedanta is known to be an enlightened Saint who went beyond his identification with his body. He promised his mother that he would do her last rites, even though he became a monk, with no attachment to any. He kept his word. His beautiful, five verse Tribute to a Mother, is famous. Shri Krishna has always showed greater love towards His mother Yashoda, than towards His father Nandababa.

There are other stories when faithful women have been held as examples for being devoted to husbands who are utterly useless and unfair. The reason for this seems to be that this was the penance (or asceticism) women could undertake as a *saadhanaa* (effort for spiritual progress), giving up all personal considerations, and attain the Supreme, once their

‘I’ was annihilated. If God abides in all beings, He can be worshipped even in the form of a man, however worthless the man himself may be, because he has become a symbol of the Supreme. If men can do severe penance by undertaking all kinds of hardships and self-inflicted pain, women could achieve the same progress by enduring the penance of serving a rotten man, by having the right attitude. However, these were the exceptions; they were examples given to give hope to women who had no escape. It is an example of constructive application in face of utter hopelessness. One can compare it to the courageous Jewish prisoners of war in the Nazi concentration camps.

I would say that the essence of the matter is submission of personal preferences to the ideal of all that God stands for.

- If everything in creation is the Brahman, why do people worship the Almighty only in some forms – why not in all forms? If everything is the Brahman, why is worship needed, anyway?

Worldly interaction is possible only because worship is restricted to some symbols. The feeling that the Almighty is present in all beings helps us to rise above our own prejudices, partialities, ego, selfishness, and other base tendencies and urges.

The Yagya is one way of worshipping everything as the Almighty, but life would be impossible if we started to place a cockroach in a temple and worship it, and bowed down to every creature we saw!

To my mind, the message is that there should be reverence for all life, reverence for nature, and self-respect. Believing that the Brahman is the substratum of creation helps us to overcome the local, colloquial, and equivocal! This faith promotes idealism and spiritual enhancement. It leads society towards peaceful co-existence, compassion, cooperation, and extending help gladly.

When we do something to help another person, we feel that we have done them a favor. We unconsciously expect the favor to be returned in future. When we do something for animals or for God, it becomes a loving offering, with no thought of return. Yes, we may feel that a good

deed will bring blessings, but this feeling serves only to bolster faith in a happy future – it does not lead to the hurts and bitter words that ruin relationships and embitter loved ones.

Worship is needed, not to appease the image of God that we hold, but to make us better people, better equipped to face the inequities of life. Faith in a higher power, a power that is benevolent, omniscient, eternal and all-powerful, is what gave the early Christians the ability to face hungry lions. It gave Swami Vivekananda the courage to set forth for America with no security or introduction. It gave Mahatma Gandhi the power to face the might of the British Empire, armed with only the principle of non-violence. It gave Mother Teresa the dauntless conviction that every single wretched life in the world is worth saving and serving.

On the other hand, atheists have nothing to fall back upon. The intellectual distrust of that, which can't be proved, is almost laughable, were it not so pathetic. What is the use of the things that are 'proved' compared to what can be gained by that, which can't be proved?

Can anyone prove that they have a headache? Can they prove that they feel love? Wouldn't people have considered TV or a cellular phone a 'miracle', a hundred years ago? Mark Twain hinted at this, in his book, 'A Yankee in King Arthur's Court'.

I feel it is unpardonably foolish and arrogant, to indicate that the hundreds of Saints, Monks, and intellectual giants have been mistaken in their belief of a higher power. Albert Einstein was a true man of science – he did not close his mind to the possibility of the existence of things he did not understand, and could neither prove nor disprove.

It is simple, practical common sense that since we can neither prove that God exists, nor can we prove that He does not exist, we should consider the benefits and disadvantages of our beliefs. When the benefits of faith have proved to be psychologically beneficial, isn't it foolish to deprive ourselves just because we want to project ourselves as rationalists or intellectuals? In fact, it is downright unintelligent to miss out on benefits of faith, on the basis of a faith that the first faith is foolish! Atheists declare that faith leads to superstition, but they ignore the examples of so

many whose faith was constructive, and they also ignore the examples of so many foolish, superstitious people who are not at all spiritual.

- Why does Shiva dance on a baby? What is the significance of the Nataraj (dancing) form, the Shivaling, and the form of a seated Shiva holding a Trishul (trident)?

I was myself puzzled by this, until I read about it in a book called 'Avatar Kathanka' published by the Gita Press. This states that the baby is actually the *apasmaara purusha* (the epileptic mankind), symbolizing ignorance or nescience. The dance is called the '*taandava*' – the dance of destruction. The flowing tresses symbolize Creation. The angry cobra symbolizes desires. The Ganga that springs out from Shiva's tresses symbolizes Gnan. The moon is illumination, and the third eye is Agni (fire, the purest element). The tandava indicates five things: birth, sustenance, Maya (illusion), forgiveness, and destruction. The dance is also an expression of the mantra, 'Om Namah Shivaya'.

The 'damaru' in one of Shiva's four hands symbolizes Creation. It also reminds us that we are all puppets in the hands of the Almighty, who makes us dance like the monkey trainer makes the performing monkeys dance. One hand symbolizes a benediction of fearlessness. One hand holds fire, symbolizing destruction. The fourth hand symbolizes that Shiva is the refuge of the Atma, and the lifted foot symbolizes liberation from rebirth.

The Shivaling is a symbol that the Almighty is the Creator of the world. The seated Shiva is the benevolent power that rules over all Creation. The ash smeared on Shiva's forehead is a reminder that this material world is only ashes. Shiva's sitting in the cremation grounds reminds us that God is present even in death, and that death is only for the body, not for the Atma, because Shiva is everybody's Atma.

- Why do we say 'Shantih Shantih Shantih' thrice, at the end of every prayer?

‘Shanti’ means ‘peace’. Shanti becomes Shantih in correct Sanskrit grammar. It is said thrice to indicate peace at three levels – physical, mental and spiritual. It also means peace in all three worlds – Heaven, earth, and Hell. It means peace in the past, present, and future. Many more connotations can be derived, because there is much in Creation that is triple-fold, for example, the three gunas, the three Devtas – Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, etc.

- What is the difference between the Vedas, Vedanta, and the Upanishads and Puranas?

The Vedas are voluminous works that cover a whole range of different issues. They prescribe rituals for worldly gains and for gaining lofty realms after death, and also ensure that the next birth will be a good one. The Vedas give the Dharma for different people, according to the eligibility of the person. The word Veda comes from the root ‘vid’, meaning, ‘to know’.

The Vedas have three divisions, called the Karma khand (the portion of karma), Upasana khand (the portion of worship) and the Gnan khand (the portion of pure knowledge). The percentage of these is supposed to be 60% for karma, 36% for upasana, and 4% for Gnan. And, this is supposed to be the proportion of what people are interested in.

Vedanta means Veda + anta (conclusion). The conclusion of knowledge is in its proper utilization. We have first to know what we have, then know what we can get, and then know what is best for us. Vedanta is composed of the Upanishads that give pure Gnan. While the Vedas tell us what we should do, and what we should not do, Vedanta merely tells us what is. The Vedas pertain to this world, and Vedanta pertains to the Brahman, or Atma, that is the substratum of all that exists.

The Puranas are mythological histories. The simple stories in the Puranas give significant insights into eternal truths. The eternal truths are handed down from generation to generation through the stories that can be remembered and understood by all, even the uneducated.

There is one more type of literature, and this is called the ‘Itihas’, meaning histories. The Mahabharata comes in this category.

- Apart from creating of an ethical society and an unproved Heaven after death, does Dharma have any other utility?

An ethical society is sufficient reason, even if that was the sole benefit of Dharma!

As far as Heaven being unproved is concerned, those who question it cannot disprove it either! If a belief helps a person to overcome the fear of death, isn’t that a worthwhile benefit, too?

Dharma has one more very obvious benefit that cannot be dismissed as a nominal benefit. That is, it removes the illusion that happiness exists in external objects. Dharma makes it clear that happiness is not merely absence of suffering, physical comfort, or sensual pleasure. It tells us that it is a state of mind, and that obtaining desired objects brings less happiness than not having any desire at all! This not only curtails greed, it removes the possibility of greed and other tendencies that create unhappiness.

Dharma helps us to have the feeling, ‘I am pure.’ This is achieved through mantras, rituals, bathing, meditating, using discrimination (about the eternal and the transient; what is right and what is wrong, etc), or giving in charity. The result of adharma (that which is contrary to Dharma) is to add lowly feelings to our ego. Since Dharma also helps us to stay away from adharma, it benefits the individual subconscious in several ways.

When a person is Dharmik, he sets a good example to others, especially to his children and close associates. This influences the whole community in a positive way. Peer pressure is utilized beneficially, for the betterment of all.

Since Dharma emphasizes on compassion and righteousness, those who believe in Dharma will be less selfish, less unreasonable, less cruel, and less unscrupulous. This will bring health, prosperity and peace to all – humans, animals and nature.

The Vedic Dharma has given considerable stress to treating Nature and animals with reverence and compassion. Unfortunately, many of the far sighted subtleties go unnoticed, to the detriment of all creation.

- Why does religion praise God so much? Does God need constant flattery to bestow favors?

We praise the Almighty to remind ourselves of the Almighty's greatness. This helps to strengthen faith. It reminds us that the Almighty is benevolent, all-powerful, omniscient, all-pervading and full of love and compassion. If we don't get instant relief from our suffering, it is because He wants that, which is best for us, and will give us the good when the time is right.

Our mind is always filled with this world and routine chores. We need to take a break. Praising the Lord – especially through music – is refreshing and peace giving.

'Don't tell God how big your problem is; tell you problem how big God is!'

- Why is Hinduism so ritualistic?

The rituals are a constant reminder of how we should work, and what our goal is. It helps us to be alert about little things like washing our hands before we touch any of the items of the puja. It helps us understand that everything has significance; that items have their positive and negative qualities. It helps us to be aware that certain timings are auspicious and that the right thing done at the right time will bring better results.

Rituals also bring together several people. The family comes together in worship. The Brahmins get an income which enables them to sustain themselves and keep alive the learning that would, otherwise, be lost in time. Rituals reiterate the fact that the elements should be respected, that the Almighty is to be revered through action, and through symbols. That, in turn, clarifies that symbols represent the power we call God.

Ritualism allows us to ask for worldly benefits without feeling guilty or selfish. It tells us that we can get whatever we want from God; that it is He who fulfills all our wishes, and that He is accessible to all.

Planning, procuring and preparing all the little items helps to focus our mind on the ritual. When we spend money, time and effort on something, we take it more seriously. So, it reiterates our faith. It also shifts our focus from the mundane world to higher things. We feel optimistic about the future, and peaceful that we have done something that will benefit us and our loved ones. We learn to concentrate upon what we are doing, and this helps us concentrate on other tasks later on.

Ritualism teaches us to use some of what we have, to worship the One, thanks to whom we have what we have! It also teaches us that we may flatter and adore temporal power, but the real worship is for the highest power!

Despite all these benefits, ritualism becomes self defeating if it is done mechanically, or overdone.

- What is the right way to do the *maalaa* (rosary)? Which mantra should one use? What good does it do to repeat the same thing over and over again?

The right way to do the mala is to hold the rosary with the thumb and the third (ring) finger of the right hand. The beads should be moved by using the middle finger. The forefinger and little finger should not touch the mala. The reason is that those two fingers have negative electricity while the thumb, second and third fingers have positive electricity. The mala should be hidden from public view. It should be kept in a place of purity and touched only with clean hands.

It is best to use a mantra given by the Guru. Books on mantras are available, but it is not considered advisable to choose a mantra at random, because most of the time we do not know our own spiritual needs. There are certain mantras, like ‘Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama

Hare Hare', that are safe for all. Chanting the Name is also considered safe.

A mantra is a group of some special words that have a subtle impact. It can be one word, like the Om, or a name of the Lord. Apart from the impact of the vibrations created by sound, saying something positive repeatedly is a kind of brain washing that has the effect of soothing us and filling us with peace and optimism. It has a therapeutic effect. It helps us to improve concentration. The sound also affects the surrounding atmosphere and people. It penetrates into the subconscious, giving a feeling of deep content and tranquility.

- Why are Hindu goddesses depicted so lusciously? Why are love scenes depicted in the books and in temple architecture?

There can be many reasons for this. My personal feeling is that the main reason is to induce men to see the Lord in all women, to turn their lust into a feeling of reverence.

The impact on women is that they do not get a superiority complex, or misuse their beauty. They get the message that their behavior should have the nobility and decorum of goddesses, that their beauty is a reflection of the divinity that is the Atma of all.

Love scenes are depicted in the religious books and in architecture because love is meant to be divine, not profane. It is a fact of life. Lust is a biological impulse that needs to be elevated to something more meaningful and lofty. Unless this is done, human love would be no different from animal mating.

The duality of creation is depicted through these scenes. The Hindu religion does not omit any aspect of human life and human needs from its scope. It allows for weaknesses but encourages constant effort for elevation. Seeing sensual architecture, a couple making love will subconsciously compare themselves with Shiva-Parvati, or Radha-Krishna. This comparison becomes a reminder that love should be divine, and that the soul in the two is one. Such feelings gradually result

in infatuation turning into love, and lust turning into a kind of tender worship of the maleness or womanhood of the partner.

- The Gita says that *kaama* (desire), *krodha* (anger) and *lobha* (greed) are the three doors to Hell. Should they be destroyed completely? Is it possible to destroy them completely?

As far as I have understood the matter, for people who live in the interactive world, it is not necessary – or advisable – to destroy kama, krodha and lobha. They should be kept under control and used constructively. We should use desire by channeling it towards purifying our mind. We should use anger against wrong doing, and we should use greed for cultivating good qualities in us, and bhakti for the Lord.

I am sure that all the great Mahatmas have succeeded in destroying not only these three, but all other negative tendencies.

- Western thought finds it objectionable that the Guru is considered to be Bhagwan – the Lord. How can a man be God? Why is this blind reverence permitted for a mere mortal?

It is difficult for anyone who is not familiar with our tradition to understand the position of a Guru in our culture. No doubt this has also been misused, just like many other practices and beliefs in all religions.

Regarding the Guru, the first injunction we are given by the Shastras (scriptures) is that we must look for a Guru who is '*shrotriya brahmanishtha*'. That means, he must be a knower of the Shastras, and he must be a knower of the Brahman. If a seeker gets trapped by a cheat who pretends to be an enlightened saint, he has only himself to blame. Even a little child knows which teacher is trustworthy, so we can't blame anyone but ourselves if we choose foolishly. The consequences of making a wrong choice are demonstrated in the incident of Pratapbhanu in the Ramcharitmanas.

An enlightened saint is not easy to find, but it is said that when the yearning of a seeker is strong, the Guru makes himself known and

available. Enlightened saints are guided by the Almighty in all they say and do, so they are able to give a seeker the right spiritual guidance. It is said that once a saint has accepted a disciple, he will protect the disciple and guide him until he obtains enlightenment, or liberation from the cycle of rebirth, no matter how many lifetimes it takes. The Guru gives the mantra that is best for the seeker, and guides him step by step towards spiritual progress.

The Guru is enlightened. He has merged with the Atma, the Brahman, the substratum of all creation. Our Shastras say that one who knows the Brahman is the Brahman. For that matter, we are all the Brahman, but we think we are individuals until we obtain enlightenment. The disciple must have implicit faith in his Guru, and never doubt what his Guru says.

In our religion, we consider the parents worthy of reverence because they give us our existence. What is existence worth, unless we have knowledge and bliss? The one who gives life is certainly worthy of worship, but the one who makes life fulfilled is even more worthy of worship. According to our scriptures, the Guru is even higher than God, because it is he who takes us to God. We would flounder endlessly in the sea of confusing and seemingly contradictory scriptures, if we did not have the guidance and support of the Guru.

Total faith is different from blind faith. Every religion advocates total faith in God and in the word of God. By having total faith in the enlightened saint who has merged with that God, we actually have total faith for God. There is no fear of being cheated, because the Guru is not interested in the worldly considerations that we fear to be deprived of. If a Guru tells us to do anything we know instinctively to be wrong, it is a sign that he is not a true Guru and nor is he worthy of obedience or reverence.

- It is said that everything is the Brahman, or Atma, and that is '*Sacchidananda*' (sat=existence, chit=consciousness, ananda=bliss). Then, why is there sorrow in the world? Why is the

world called '*asat*' (unreal; meaning, a relative truth, like a wave in the sea)? Why are some people so stupid?

The interactive world we see with our individual ego is real until we reach a level of spiritual development that is required to understand that the ultimate reality is the Brahman, or Atma, and that the substratum of all we perceive is that same Brahman, and it is Sacchidananda. Unless and until we reach that stage, we have to accept the inequities of this world, and suffer at mental, physical and metaphysical levels.

Enlightened saints say that the world is *asat* because they compare it to a wave in the ocean. The wave is real while it lasts, but its existence is fleeting, whereas the ocean is enduring. Our body is fleeting, compared to the existence of the Atma. Our emotions and experiences are fleeting, in comparison to our whole life. *Asat* is also an indication that just as a mirage is *asat* even though it is perceived by the eyes, the world we experience through our senses is a mirage in eternity.

Another meaning is that we perceive reality subjectively. The same bright or cloudy sky will raise different feelings in different people. Our moods affect our reactions, health, appetite, and output. Some people love dogs, others fear them or hate them. Such perceptions cannot be called enduring truths, because the ultimate truth is something that cannot ever be negated by any. That enduring, eternal, ultimate truth is the Brahman, the Atma, Sacchidananda.

Even enlightened saints experience hunger, thirst, and fatigue. They do not become inanimate or unfeeling just because they have realized the ultimate truth. They are sad when they see others suffering, though they have the will power and detachment to not become depressed by their own physical suffering. We can understand this to some extent by remembering how we endure a surgery without getting depressed! We know that this temporary pain is necessary for our own benefit, that it is a part of life. Sorrows come and go; so do pleasures. Both are fleeting, and can be understood as *asat*. Water vapor is real, but it is also unreal since it is actually evaporated water. It is the same with the world, and

this is why the world is also called '*anirvachaneeya*' – that, which cannot be defined.

The inequity in this world is due to the actions of the individual jeeva (soul connected to a body) that is born again and again, until he is born as a human and obtains enlightenment. Wrong actions cause suffering, and good actions bring good fortune. This is the only logical explanation for the seemingly random circumstances of birth and life. This is why we see sorrow, and stupid people, even though the ultimate truth is Sacchidananda.

- What is the meaning of Varna, and Ashram?

Varna has no exact equivalent in English. People use the word 'caste' or 'class' in broad terms, to explain the four divisions of birth, aptitude and occupation, in society. The highest Varna is the Brahmin Varna. Brahmins are inclined to be intellectual, prudent, learned, peaceful, content, and ethically oriented. Their function in society is to keep alive the rituals and the righteous lifestyle of Dharma, and protect the knowledge of our Scriptures.

Kshatriyas come next. They are the warriors, who rule and protect the people. They are guided by Brahmins in all spiritual matters, and also in what is righteous in maintaining law and order.

Vaishyas are the third level of society. They are the traders and farmers, who ensure that people's material needs are met. Shudras are lowest in the order of the Varnas. They are generally simple and hardworking, taking up the heavy work and also lowly tasks like cleaning night soil.

The Vedas say that in the body of Maha Vishnu – the Almighty who pervades the world – the Brahmins are the head, the Kshatriyas are the arms, the Vaishyas are the stomach, and the Shudras are the feet.

The Varna system ensures that each type of person gets a place in society. The earliest concept was that each group is needed, and is equal, just as we value our head, arms, stomach and feet. It was only later on that Shudras started to be exploited and abused. The Vedas state unequivocally that the Lord abides in all. Anyone who abuses another

being is sinning against that Omniscient, All-powerful, supremely compassionate Master to whom we all pray. To treat any as inferior is against the Sanatan Dharma.

Ashram means the stages of people as they grow. The first is Brahmacharya Ashram, which is composed of celibate students. Earlier, a Brahmachari lived at the Ashram (hermitage) of his Guru, served him and learnt from him.

When the boy completed his studies, he returned home and got married, thus entering the Grihastha Ashram – the state of a householder. The duty of a grishastha is to look after his family, earn, save money, and also look after social needs. The Grihastha is the pillar on which all other Ashrams depend.

The third is the Vanaprastha Ashram, where the couple lead a semi-retired life. This Ashram was preparatory to leaving the world, even if one was not inclined to become a Monk. It allowed the son to gradually take over the running of the business from his father. The daughter-in-law gradually became the mistress of the house. They had their parents to turn to for advice; the grandchildren had the company of wise and loving grandparents, and the couple had the satisfaction of seeing that their children were becoming capable of managing on their own. This semi-retired life gave scope for introspection and moving more and more towards spirituality. It was an extremely practical method to accept and enjoy old age, and have no fear or regrets at the time of death.

The last and most respected Ashram is the Sanyas Ashram, where a man becomes a Monk, relinquishes the world and leaves himself completely in the hands of the Almighty. Even in earlier times, not everyone became a Monk, even if they were a Brahmin.

Both the Ashram and the Varna are phases in life, and the arrangements had many benefits for all. This system is no longer practical, but it exists in every society, and also in classless societies. Everywhere there are people who are intellectuals and those who are valorous. Some are excellent businessmen while some just want the satisfaction of physical work and have an urge to serve (like dedicated nurses and doctors). The

existence of the Varna system ensured that everyone had job security, and was respected for his abilities.

- What is the exact meaning of prasad and why is it so important?

Prasad – pronounced *prasaada*, can mean either food that has been sanctified by offering to the Lord, or it can mean Grace.

The importance of Grace needs no elaboration. The prasad offered to the Deity is distributed to all present, so that they get the Grace of the Lord's blessings. This has social relevance because even people who have quarreled, offer prasad to each other. It is unthinkable to refuse the prasad offered by even an enemy. Offering prasad to all present (even people who are considered untouchable) creates goodwill in the one who offers as well as the one who receives. It strengthens the conviction of divine benevolence, and leaves the feeling that good things are to be first offered to the Almighty and then shared with all. Prasad is usually sweet, and it leaves a person with a sweet taste in the mouth and the feeling that he has God's blessings with him. It is a practice that is positive in every way.

- They say that Bhagwan showers Grace on all, at all times. Then why do some people become good and kind, and others wicked and cruel?

Grace – or *kripa* – is of four kinds. Ishwara *kripa*, Shashtra *kripa*, Guru *kripa* and Atma *kripa*. Ishwara *kripa* is when we get a human form. Shashtra *kripa* is when we have faith in the Shastras (scriptures). Guru *kripa* is when we get a competent spiritual guide who helps us on the spiritual journey, and Atma *kripa* is when our Atma urges us to go on the right path. The absence of even one of these keeps a person away from progressing on the right path.

Dharma.

There is no exact translation for the word Dharma. People try to use ‘religion’ or ‘righteousness’ as a substitute, but the intrinsic meaning is both these, and more. Dharma is also used to indicate ‘duty’, and the intrinsic nature of things. It indicates what is right for whom, or what, or when. It indicates the essential nature of the different beings and things. As with everything else (except the ultimate truth that we refer to as the Brahman, the Atma, or the sub-stratum of all Creation), Dharma is also relative. What is Dharma for one can be adharma (not Dharma) for another.

The Sanatan Dharma is ‘hita-pradhhan’ – it gives maximum importance to that which benefits all. It clarifies that virtue does not lie in an item or action – it lies in the motive. A surgeon’s cutting the skin of his patient is *punya* (having spiritual merit) but a motivated attack is *paapa* (sin). The surgeon’s patient may die, but the surgeon will not incur sin; whereas the person who attacks someone with a knife will incur sin even if his victim survives the assault.

The Dharma of an individual depends on his eligibility, status, basic temperament, circumstances, etc. The purpose of the caste system was to divide people into four basic types, depending on their aptitude and temperament. It was intended to give scope for all to develop and have a place in society. Unfortunately this admirable aim was distorted and misused to exploit and humiliate; and it became as great a disgrace to humanity as slavery.

The caste of the person depended on birth as well as aptitude. The ancient books are full of examples of people changing their caste through endeavor, for example, the sage Vishwamitra was born a Kshatriya and became a Sage. Kings and even Devtas (demi-gods) whose behavior was not in keeping with their caste were often cursed by sages to turn into a ‘*chaandaala*’ (a lowly caste), a *raakshasa* (demon), or even into another species.

Society was divided into four *Varna* (classes or castes) and four *Aashrama* (state in life). The four Varnas were Brahmin, Kshatriya,

Vaishya and Shudra. They compose the body of the Purusha (the cosmic man, or God as the totality of the world). The Purusha personifies society as a man, in keeping with the concept that the whole world is pervaded and supported by Vishnu, with the Brahmins as the head, the Kshatriyas as the arms, the Vaishyas as the stomach and the Shudras as the feet. This is written clearly and repeatedly in all the authentic works of Hinduism. It ought to have dispelled any mistaken concepts that permitted abuse of humans in the name of religion.

The caste system gave a broad work allocation for the whole society. The Dharma of a Brahmin was to study the Vedas and other philosophies, to live ethically and promote ethical living and spirituality in society. They were the guardians of the highest thought and practices that were indispensable for inner and outer peace and prosperity. The purpose of restricting the availability of the knowledge of powerful rites was to avoid its misuse by the wicked or the unthinking. They were the guardians of wisdom.

The Dharma of a Kshatriya was to protect society and uphold righteousness. They ensured peace, security and stability.

The Dharma of the Vaishyas was to look after trade, commerce, and agriculture. They ensured economical progress and the availability of all requirements.

The Dharma of the Shudra was to serve the other three castes by manual labor. People with a low IQ, or lack of aptitude, were ensured a place in society. They had the satisfaction of knowing that they were fulfilling the need for sanitation and heavy labor.

The principle of dignity in labor was a part of this system, because nobody can deny that even today, we see people divided temperamentally into these basic activities and walks of life. Each type is a vital part of every society.

Even today, we see that some people have a fetish for cleanliness and shirk from those who are unkempt and coarse. Even today we see that people with a low IQ are not interested in higher studies; nor do they appreciate the finer arts. We see people whose interest in life is simply making money, or joining the Army, and others, who want to do

research all their lives. The four temperaments are basic to mankind; each type deserves to have scope for doing what satisfies their nature without harming any other.

The four Ashrams were the stages in the life of an individual. They were the Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyas.

The young boys were sent to the Guru's Ashram (hermitage) to serve the Guru and to study. This phase of life was called the Brahmacharya Ashram. The child was expected to gain knowledge, get used to hardships, discipline, and simple food. He learnt how to be humble, cooperate with other students (regardless of their background), practice celibacy, and be obedient. This life saved him from being spoilt by luxuries and pampering, and it saved him from getting ensnared in the attractions and aversions inevitable in family life. A degree of spirituality, decorum, and ability to think impartially were developed during this period, while the boys were 8 – 16 years old.

The next stage was the Grihastha Ashram – the life of a married householder. The Grihastha is considered to be the foundation of the other three Ashrams, because it is they who provide for all the Ashrams. The householder was supposed to lead a model life, and enjoy ethical indulgences with a part of his income. The income was supposed to be divided into five parts. One part for his family, one for his business, one for Dharma, one for renown, and one for looking after dependants. This Ashram was for persons between ages 25 - 50

The Vanaprastha Ashram was a semi-retired life. The householders delegated all responsibilities to sons and daughters-in-law, and turned towards philosophy and spirituality. They gradually became detached from the world even if they stayed at home. This stage was at the age of 50 – 75.

The last Ashram – Sanyas – was mainly for Brahmins. They became Monks and wandered off without any worldly possessions, begging for their daily food and accepting all suffering with equanimity, as they no longer identified with their body.

Obviously, the Dharma of a Sanyasi (Monk) would be different from the Dharma of a Brahmachari, Grihastha, or Vanaprastha. The same would

apply to all the other Ashrams. The Dharma of a Brahmin (or any other caste) would be different from the other three castes.

So, each caste and each Ashram had a basic framework of their Dharma. This was called the *saamaanya dharma* – the common Dharma. The samanya Dharma has all the basic values common to all religions and civilizations.

Then there is the *vishe'sha dharma*, the Dharma for specific circumstances. For example, it is a mother's duty to feed her child, but if the child has an upset stomach, it will be her Dharma to not give him the rich food even if he is hungry. It is a Kshtriya's Dharma to rule, and fight a righteous battle, but if he develops a deep detachment and wants to have a vision of the Lord, he will have to practice asceticism that is normally not his Dharma.

Then, there is the *aapad dharma*, the Dharma in a crisis. For example, a Brahmin does not fight, but if it was a matter of protecting his life or the life of his dependents, it would be his Dharma to protect himself and his dependents, even if it meant resorting to violence.

The question of what is Dharma, for whom, and when, is very difficult to define. As a basic guideline, it is said that that which helps all and harms none is Dharma. In the event of a choice, that which is the least harmful to society is Dharma.

Food becomes a controversial topic in Dharma, because some sects – like the Vaishnav (those who worship the Brahman as Vishnu) are vegetarians, and some – like the Shaktas (who worship Shakti, the Brahman's power in female form) – are not. Among the meat eaters, some eat fish while others eat all forms of flesh, though beef is not accepted because the cow is revered, and dog meat is considered to be the food of the lowliest.

As I understand it, food habits and social customs have been formed due to practical reasons prevailing in those times. The Mahabharata has an interesting episode. Sage Vishwamitra once undertook a lengthy penance for the welfare of the world. During this period there was a famine, and people were dying of starvation. Desperate for some food he ultimately found a Chandala who had just one piece of dog meat.

The original narration is long and involved, but the crux of the matter is that after giving every possible reason for not giving the meat to Vishwamitra, the Chandala said, 'If I give you this meat, I will die of starvation, because this is all the food I have.'

'Better you die, than I die,' said the Sage, 'because your staying alive will not benefit anyone else, but if I can stay alive and complete my penance, thousands will benefit!'

This indicates that the purpose of eating is to stay alive and the purpose of staying alive is to be of benefit to the world. So, although it was not Dharma for Vishwamitra to eat dog meat, it became Dharma for him to eat it, in order to live, to benefit the people. This is 'Apad Dharma'.

Someone asked my Guruji, Swami Akhandanand Saraswati, about the impracticality of elaborate rituals. The clarification he gave is so succinct, relevant and appealing that I feel it should be included in this chapter on Dharma. Maharaj Shri said that religious rituals are of two kinds. One kind has an eternal significance and the other kind has a social relevance for a certain time and place.

For example, the thread ceremony of a young boy is linked to man's spiritual needs and the development of awareness that life has a higher purpose. The taking of marriage vows with Agni Devta (the presiding deity of fire) as a witness, has relevance because it commits the couple to a joint spiritual quest as well as a life of worldly fulfillment. There are other ceremonies at birth and death that have spiritual meaning. All these should be maintained, albeit with simplicity and brevity, according to what is feasible.

There are many traditional practices which have no spiritual significance, and these can be avoided without losing anything.

The highest Dharma is considered to be the '*bhaagvat dharma*', which means the Dharma recommended by Bhagwan. In it, we have only to offer up all our actions to Him, but the condition is that the intention must be to please Him, a good intention that does not wish ill for any. Only those who have faith in a higher power that symbolizes everything that is good, can follow this Dharma in letter and spirit. There is no scope to bluff anyone, or cheat, in this Dharma, because the conscience

knows the real motive and the conscience is the judge. In this, the person's impure emotions are automatically eradicated and he begins to understand that it is actually the Lord who is the mainstay of all.

This kind of surrender has many positive side effects for a bhakta (devotee). Our arrogance is reduced, and we develop humility. We begin to accept our limitations without feeling guilty, inadequate, or ashamed. The fear of failure ceases to trouble us. We become reconciled to success or failure – and that is the beginning of equanimity and faith. The faith, that whatever happens is for the best, is strengthened. We no longer get so agitated about not being appreciated, or being blamed unjustly.

This makes us emotionally independent, brings serenity, and mental stability. An emotionally stable person is better able to take the knocks of life without breaking down. An emotionally stable person can contribute to a happy atmosphere better than those who are emotionally unstable, depressed or nervous. An emotionally stable person is less inclined to cause unhappiness or do things that are unethical.

Hence, this clearly leads to individual and social happiness, peace, and well-being at the micro and macro levels.

My Guruji used to say that Dharma is that, which upholds (does *dhaaran*). He would quote a Sanskrit sentence saying the Dharma protects the person who protects Dharma. This used to puzzle me until I realized that protection from sin was one thing, but Dharma also protects us in little ways when we adhere to it. For example, if I avoid telling a lie, I am saved from a number of unpleasant consequences and complications, than the slight discomfort I could have avoided by lying.

Upon reflection, we realize how many problems we create for ourselves by taking unethical short-cuts for short term gains! How much less complicated life would be, if we had, instead, protected Dharma and saved ourselves from these entanglements! Criminals, addicts of drinking or drugs or worse, and others, will agree wholeheartedly, because it was the first step (disregarding Dharma) that led them to all sorts of regrettable actions. My Swamiji also called Dharma the 'brake' that saves us, like the brakes in a car avert accidents.

The word ‘Dharma’ is also used to indicate the intrinsic quality of something. For example, it is the Dharma of fire to burn, the Dharma of wind is to dry, the Dharma of the sun is to give heat and light, etc. The Dharma of an individual depends on several factors, like his Varna, Ashram, etc. The Dharma of an individual changes, depending on his circumstances and his current status in life. The Dharma of a child is to study and obey his elders, and develop well. The Dharma of a man is to look after his wife, parents and children, earn and keep his religious and social obligations.

At times people get confused, when loyalties clash. At such a time, the scriptures or enlightened Saints can give the correct guidance; or else, an unbiased conscience can also give proper guidance, because Dharma is innate knowledge of right and wrong. When we allow our personal preferences to influence our decision then it becomes adharma – that, which is contrary to Dharma.

I had a very revealing conversation with a Mahatma once. I wanted to know why dogs are looked down upon in religion, when they have so many excellent qualities. He explained that dogs are not looked down in our religion; their good qualities are quoted in several places. He pointed out the episode in the Mahabharata, when Yudhishtira made his last journey and was accompanied by a dog. He was the only Pandava to be able to go to Heaven without passing through death, but he was told that he would have to leave the dog behind. Yudhishtira refused, saying the dog had been his faithful companion, and he would not abandon the dog even for the joys of Heaven! The Mahatma also said that in one of the Puranas, the sage Dattatraya had made a dog one of his Gurus, because of the dog’s many good qualities.

‘Then why do people object to having dogs in the Puja room?’ I asked. ‘It is because of hygiene,’ he explained. ‘People were illiterate, and religion was used to teach them cleanliness and hygiene. Dogs would scavenge in garbage dumps, and their nails would be filled with germs. So, keeping dogs outdoors was a way of preventing diseases.’

‘But, that is hygiene, not Dharma!’ I said.

‘What else is Dharma, if not inner and outer purity?’ he asked.

This also clarifies the thing we call ‘conscience’. It seems to me that the conscience is what tells humans what our Dharma – as a human – is. Even uneducated rustics feel good when they do something good, and their conscience bothers them when they do something that is basically wrong. This subtle code of ethics does not recognize Income Tax laws or state boundaries, or any of the rights and wrongs imposed by tradition, indigenous culture, or State. This code of ethics is found even in animals, who kill only for survival, and who feel hunger, pain, fatigue, love, fear, and other emotions just as we do. It is when we disregard this basic Dharma – we can call it ethics, conscience, morals, values, or anything else – that our problems begin. And, we also begin to create problems for others!

So, by adhering to Dharma, we learn to consider that we have the right to do what we want only when we do not encroach on any another’s right. Then, this leads to a more compassionate and ethically aware social order and does, indeed, protect people who protect Dharma. It is ironic that even crooks of the first order want others to be honest and ethical towards them, at least!! That is why it is so common to hear of ‘honor among thieves’!

It is practically impossible to adhere to Dharma completely, and this is why it becomes all the more important to make our own rules about what we will not stoop to, and stick to them! Those who do so will have fewer regrets and tensions than those who don’t.

Avatar

As a child I often wondered why the Almighty needs to take an Avatar. It was a long time before I understood the matter to my own satisfaction. There are any number of erudite explanations with references from the Vedas and different books, which will only bore the reader. So, I give my own idea in simple terms and hope the reader finds it satisfying.

It is said that in the beginning, only the Brahman was. Then, He created a desire in Himself, to multiply, and play the game of Creation. So, duality was created, and the Brahman became the Purusha and Prakriti. He first manifested as the sun, Surya Devta, who is worshipped as Vishnu the Creator. The sun is also considered to be Brahma, who emerged from the naval of the Lord Vishnu as He lay on the thousand headed serpent Anant (also called *she'sha*), in the milky ocean, with Laxmi at His feet and on His breast, during dissolution. Then Brahma did asceticism and created the world.

Hiranyagarbha is the consciousness that pervades everything. We say that the Lord abides in all that is animate and inanimate. The spirit is dormant in the inanimate items, and it manifests in animate items according to the evolution of the individual being. It is not that the spiritual evolution of all members of any given species is at the same level. There are differences in physical, intellectual and spiritual levels, and also in their circumstances and in how their lives develop. While a portion of this is due to *praarabdha* – or destiny – of humans, a major portion is due to the choices made by the person in little ways and in major decisions. This is commonly known as free will. It is God's grace that He allows us the scope to rise above our baser tendencies by giving us the freedom to opt for the nobler option. As soon as we make a choice, all the dormant tendencies that have been imbued since time immemorial, rise up and propel us towards either the upward or the downward development of our mind and life.

All beings are influenced by the three gunas (tendencies) called Sattva (the lofty), Rajas (a combination of good and bad), and Tamas (dense and confused). The purpose is to rise from the lower to the higher and

stay in the higher until we reach a stage where we can rise above all three. The three gunas are an integral part of Prakriti – the Lord’s power of illusion and creation. If the Lord did not intervene, we would flounder helplessly from one guna to another in an endless cycle. The conscience is the Lord’s voice in our heart. It always tells us what is right and what is wrong. When a person’s desire makes him ignore this voice, it weakens until it can hardly be heard. When a person listens to it and follows it, it builds up the strength of character that helps a person fulfill his destiny. The options are always open to a human, so it is the individual who chooses his destiny, and gets the fame, fortune, loved one, Heaven or spiritual progress that he craves.

Also, if the Lord descends to our level, surely we can, some day, ascend to His? Or, at least, reduce the gap?

The commonly understood meaning of ‘*avataara*’ is ‘to descend’. God descends to a human level, to destroy the wicked and protect the good. Another meaning is to manifest; to change from the unseen to the seen, to be such as can be experienced by the senses.

Brahmaji made the senses facing the external world, so it becomes natural for us to consider the outer world the real world. The mind fluctuates between the external and the internal, and introspective people are accused of being absent minded because their focus keeps shifting from the external to the internal. An imbalance leads to insanity or insensitivity. It is also the reason for real and imagined supernatural experiences. The Gita says, ‘*samatvam yogamuchhyate*’ – balance is necessary to be yoked to the highest.

The Avatar of the Almighty, therefore, is the transformation of an unseen power to something tangible. We are used to believing that only that, which can be proved, is real. Religious bigotry and frauds have ensured that even genuine supernatural phenomenon are suspect until established. So, in His infinite mercy and compassion, the Lord manifests and helps us to believe that a higher power exists, and that the higher power that rules the world is good, and just; and He loves us, and is always with us, and we can depend on Him, and that He is worth the effort we make to be good and move towards Him.

Furthermore, the Lord Vishnu manifests as a fish, turtle, boar, half man-half lion, and a dwarf, so that we can have no doubts that He abides in all possible (and improbable) beings. Rivers like the Ganga, and plants like the Tulsi are also worshipped as symbols of the same power. So are stones like the Shaligram and Shivaling, mountains like the Govardhan and Kailsas, lakes like the Mansarovar and Narayansarovar. So are the sea, earth, water, wind, fire, the sun, the moon, other planets, and space. Mythological forces and powers that we have no means of seeing are also worshipped. All this helps us to understand that the world is far more than what is seen, and that there are forces beyond our ken or control.

This helps to develop faith, and faith is needed to build up strength of character, which, again, is vital for success. Long ago I'd read a sentence, but can't remember who wrote it. 'Faith is to believe in what we cannot see, and the reward of faith is to see what we believe in.' A modern skeptic may say that that holds true also for things that are negative and harmful. True. Nuclear power can, and is misused. Does that mean it has no benefits? Are we to miss out on the good because someone may misuse any and every good thing we have? Food gives nutrition, but overeating kills more people than fasting. Overwork can kill, but fewer people die of overwork than of an indolent lifestyle! No doubt spiritual power can be misused, but that does not mean it does not exist, or cannot give benefits!

Other benefits we get from an Avatar are the folklore and literature that keeps the Avatar vibrant even when it is over. It helps us focus our mind pleasurably on the positive, and inspire us towards ethical development. The idol we use in ritual worship comes alive because of the mental picture developed by the folk lore and scriptures. If the mind is to move away from the mundane, it needs an alternative. The Lord's Avatar provides this alternative. To focus on the enchanting image of Krishna, and remember His countless frolics, is to create a live Krishna in our heart. To remember the righteousness of Rama is to gain the confidence to be righteous. Although the Puranas describe Avatars of Shiva, Gauri, Laxmi, etc, the Avatars of Vishnu – Rama and Krishna – are the most

commonly worshipped. Shiva and the different forms of Gauri are worshipped as themselves, not as Avatars. Hanumanji is an exception. He is an extremely popular and potent Avatar of Shiva, but is worshipped as a beloved servant of Rama, rather than as an Avatar of Shiva. This makes no difference, since Vishnu and Shiva are actually the same essence. Moreover, in mythology, Rama (who is an Avatar of Vishnu) worships Shiva whereas Shiva worships Vishnu.

To me, the most important aspect of an Avatar is that it gives me the courage of my convictions. I get the strength to do what I feel is right even if it is against the common opinion. It helps me to overcome my fears and weaknesses, since I know that there is someone who loves me, who is omniscient, all-powerful and supremely just as well as compassionate; whatever happens will turn out to be for the best even if I don't understand it now.

In daily life, it helps me retain a positive, tolerant outlook. It allows me to remain tranquil and philosophical when I face traffic jams and domestic disasters. It helps me notice the suffering of others and understand how much I have to be thankful for. I see those who are less fortunate and know that my good fortune is the result of some good I did in the past – either in this life or a previous one – so I must be careful to do as much good as I can. Misfortunes are a result of my own past sins, so I am not justified in blaming anyone else. I must avoid doing wrong in future. I feel grateful, and want to express my gratitude by serving Him through my actions and attitude. This helps me be a better person. It helps me be better balanced, and it helps me to overcome the inherent greed, anger, desire, laziness, and other tendencies that lead to suffering and strife. It helps me to be happy and spread happiness!

Since there is no way of proving or disproving the Lord's Avatars, I prefer to accept the benefits brought by believing in them! My Guruji used to tell us to see the lives of Rama and Krishna, and how they remained smiling and undaunted throughout all their trials and tribulations. If even God has to face suffering when He comes as a human, how can we expect to have a life without suffering? He came, and lived as a man, and faced problems and setbacks, without giving up

Dharma. So can we, because we are humans and have access to the knowledge that He is in us and with us. His Avatars gave the Saints the courage to follow His example, and the Saints set us an example by living a life of Truth.

The Lord's Avatars are supposed to be innumerable. The Gita says that the Lord takes an Avatar whenever there is a threat to Dharma. He comes to destroy the wicked and protect the weak. We doubt this statement because we see Dharma threatened everywhere, and the wicked flourish! 'Where is your God now?' ask atheists. I do believe that God is present whenever anyone takes a stand against something that is wrong. I see the Lord in every positive movement, like animal welfare, or environmental protection. I see Him in people like Florence Nightingale, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa, to name a few. There are countless thousands in every country who do their little bit in their own way, and thanks to whom the world has not yet become a Hell completely. There are journalists and photographers who risk their lives to reveal the truth. There are beggars on pavements who share a bit of their begged food with the strays beside them. There are paid nurses who give their patients the gift of a kind word that is not included in their job profile. There are poor farmers who reject factory farming, even at the sacrifice of something they need to get for their children. And, Oh! so many more, who I can't even list! Each and every one of them has an Avatar of the Lord in their hearts, because what is God, if not goodness? And, why should God be restricted to the names and shapes written in our scriptures? It seems quite arrogant when anyone says that God cannot have a form, or cannot be seen – who are we to decide that He has limitations and incapacities?!

Karma, Prarabdha and Sanchit.

The theory of Karma is that all our actions have proportionate reactions. Karma means action, but it includes the motive behind the action, and the proportion of the action to the capacity and circumstances of the doer.

The purpose of this theory is – in my opinion – to make us aware that we must be watchful in all we do. The Gita divides this into three types – karma, akarma and vikarma. Karma is an action done by choice. Karma results either in *paapa* (sin) or in *punya* (spiritual merit). Akarma is a meaningless action that creates neither sin nor merit. Vikarma is wrong action that has adverse repercussions.

The straightforward understanding is that we get good fortune if we do good; we suffer if we do wrong, and meaningless actions give no results. The fruit of the action can be given in this life, or in a future life.

Prarabdha is the sum of good and bad karma that we will get in the current life, and Sanchit is the sum total of all our good and bad karmas since the beginning of time.

Even being born a human is due to our karmas. It is commonly accepted that the Lord Graces a jeeva (Atma attached to a body) by selecting the good deeds, to give him a human form. It is only through a human form that a person can be liberated from the cycle of rebirth. It is said that a person is given a human form when the sin and merit are almost even. A human form is called a ‘karma yoni’ and all other species – including Devtas and Asuras – are called ‘bhoga yoni’. The meaning of this is that only humans get merit or sin depending upon their actions. None of the other species are at liberty to make a choice that leads to a fruit. Their prarabdha compels them to endure the fruit of past actions while in that body. It is merely a matter of working out past karma. Only in a human form can the person create new karma or rise above the laws of karma.

A human being has the power to change his prarabdha, because of his choice in responding to the seeming good fortune or bad luck. This is where a spiritual inclination comes into play. A person who believes in a higher power that is benevolent, merciful and just, will face bad luck

with greater fortitude than a person who lacks this faith. The theory of Karma makes a man think that he is merely reaping the fruits of his own actions. The direct result of this is generally a resolve to not to wrong in future, and to pray to God to reduce the severity of the bad luck. Similarly, when good fortune comes, a person who has faith will not be as likely to let it go to his head, as will a person who has no faith. A bhakta (one who has bhakti – love and devotion for God) will thank the Lord for the good luck, and want to share his good fortune with those less fortunate. He will try to use his assets to do good deeds, so that he continues to get good luck in future.

All of us have experienced unexpected kindness, and unwarranted injustice. A bhakta will – when faced with kindness – be grateful to the person and to God. When faced with injustice, he will be inclined to think that he must have done the man some harm in a past life, and is merely paying off a debt. This saves him from hating the one who has been unjust. Hatred is a negative emotion that does greater harm to the person who hates, than to the one who is hated.

This theory also saves us from having any expectation from anyone we help, because it is always at the back of our mind that whatever we do is because we want to do what is right, and avoid the repercussions of doing the wrong thing. We all know how heartbreaking it is to find that those who we have extended ourselves for, either turn away from us, or actually blame us for something we never imagined! The experience is heart-breaking – unless one is wise enough to accept this as our ‘Karma’!

In the Vedic literature, Karma does not mean only an action. It also means a ritual for spiritual merit. A Yagya (fire sacrifice) is called a ‘*karma-kaanda*’. I have always felt that the word sacrifice – used so commonly for rituals – is not an adequate representation of what Yagya actually symbolizes. Yes, it is a sacrifice, but only in a limited sense. A Yagya is done by using some of what we have, for the good of all. Different kinds of seeds and herbs are used as oblations, and so is ghee (rarified butter) and a sweet made of milk. These are offerings to the Devtas, the elements, planets, and ancestors. Fire is worshipped because

it is the most purifying element. Even the dirtiest thing put in it is purified, without the fire becoming impure. Fire carries everything higher, and it is a basic psychological understanding that higher means good and lower means bad – to simplify the matter.

A Yagya creates the awareness that there are powers that cannot be controlled or seen by us. It makes us understand that we have to share a little of what we have with the world, for our own happiness and prosperity. We realize that our physical body is composed of the elements, and governed by supernatural forces and other factors that we do not understand or know.

A Yagya is a symbol that tells us that life is a Yagya, and our assets are not for us to enjoy alone. We have to pay the Municipality and Government and the companies for using the water, land, electricity, etc. The fact that no bill comes from Nature for her life sustaining gifts does not mean that we have no obligation to repay her, or that we have a right to exploit her mercilessly.

A Yagya can be done for obtaining wealth, fame, some worldly benefit, or Heaven after death. It can also be undertaken to please the Almighty, and to purify the four-fold mind, composed of the *mana* = emotional mind, *buddhi* = the intellect, *chitta* = present state of mind, and *ahankaara* = the subtle ego of individuality. This is also called the subtle body or the antahkaran. A person doing a Yagya has to have wealth, be well-organized, and have people from all walks of life, to successfully complete the Yagya if he is to obtain the desired benefits. Learned Brahmins are needed for the scientific arrangements and correctly pronounced, appropriate mantras. Mantras are words that affect unseen planes. Science is acknowledging the power of vibrations at different levels. Words create vibrations that affect the subtle elements in and outside our body. The therapeutic effect of chanting mantras is well established. In time, science will also reveal the authenticity of mantras that affect our mind, body and atmosphere.

The most important thing is that the law of Karma should not be misused. Many people use it as an excuse to avoid making any effort, or extend help. I had once gone to a Jain gentleman, to ask for a

contribution towards the stray dog sterilization/anti-rabies vaccination program I was involved with. The gentleman was very receptive when I explained how this helped both the stray dogs and the very poor who lived in hutments populated by stray dog. He seemed inclined to support us, when his accountant – also a Jain – said that our program would interfere with the ‘karma’ of the dogs and poor people’s suffering. His stand was that they had to suffer for their sins, so we should let them suffer.....! It was impossible to convince him that their karma would come to them anyway – we should improve our karma by doing what we can to reduce suffering! My colleague asked him, ‘Do you never take medicine for a headache?’ He understood the implication, but refused to budge from his stand. In my opinion, that is a totally faulty interpretation of the theory of Karma.

Another misuse of this theory is when people use it to justify their laziness or lack of enterprise. ‘Oh, if it is my prarabdha, I will get wealth somehow,’ they say. This attitude is called ‘*akarmanyataa*’ – that means an excuse for shirking karma. The Gita repeatedly tells us to do our duty without expecting the fruit. So, the theory of Karma means that it is our duty to put in a sincere effort, and the success or failure should be left to God. If we get failure, it is due to our (past) karma; and if we get success, it is God’s Grace. The only credit we can take is that of having tried sincerely. Naturally this saves us from developing an ego, becoming bitter, or losing heart. We are able to retain our serenity and hope even in the midst of our greatest disappointments.

The final argument in favor of the theory of Karma is that it always works to lead us towards good deeds, and avoiding wrong actions. It is the only logical explanation for the inequities of birth, health, appearance, intellect, position, etc. We don’t need to blame God or another human for misfortunes. A misfortune becomes easier to accept if we feel that it is the fruit of sowing a bad seed, and we have only ourselves to blame. I think that it would be a great relief if, at the time of death, one can be completely free of bitterness towards anyone, or anything that has brought sorrow in the past. And, this can be attained with greater ease if the person believes in the law of Karma.

Apart from this, the law of Karma also inculcates the faith that death is merely a passing into a new phase of existence, and not the end of existence. It gives hope in place of despair, to the person who is dying and also to the loved ones who are losing their loved one. This makes death a little more bearable – which is a great help, since it is inevitable! Even for those who have regrets at not living the way they should have lived, there is the hope of being able to make amends and progress in the next life. They need not despair over lost opportunities, because new opportunities will be available.

One important factor in the theory of Karma is that if a person gives in charity, he will get wealth in his next birth; but it is not necessary that he will also get happiness. A person who gives happiness to someone is sure to get happiness. Wealth and happiness do not necessarily go together.

So, in the absence of any tangible proof one way or the other, it would be foolish to not accept a theory that promotes the betterment of the world.

In conclusion, let me quote a verse from the Vedas. It is supposed to be uttered every morning, to remind ourselves about the importance of work.

*Karaagre` vasate` laxmi, karamoole` sarasvati,
Karamadhye` tu govindam, prabhaate` kuru karadarshanam.*

The meaning is that Laxmi, the goddess of grace and prosperity abides in our hands, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning and wisdom, abides at the root of the arm. Govind (Vishnu) abides in the middle of the arm. This is what we should see when we look at our hands every morning. This is a clear inference that wisdom should propel what we do, and our hand should do everything to bring grace and prosperity and the Lord, Govind, will make us flexible enough to move dexterously. All worldly benefits and spiritual gain can be achieved through the karmas we do.

Purushartha.

The word '*purushaartha*' is composed of 'purush', meaning a human being, and 'artha', meaning possession or achievement. Purushartha is used in the sense of human endeavor that leads to one or more of the four major achievements of a successful life.

According to the Vedic religion, there are four Purusharthas – Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Dharma means to lead a righteous life and do the rituals prescribed for this life and the next. Artha means wealth, or the successful procurement of the goal. Kama means desire, and getting the desired object is the Kama Purushartha. Moksha means liberation from rebirth, and also to be free of all worldly concerns.

There is strong psychology involved in this. The ultimate goal of a successful life is happiness. Living a righteous life is essential for enduring happiness. A righteous person is more likely to be successful and prosperous than an unethical person who may make quick money, but whose success is never stable. Artha helps to obtain desired objects and worldly objectives. After having enjoyed the benefits of wealth and desired objects, a righteous person will definitely want to be liberated from all worries, and will want Moksha.

This simple statement of the goals in life is the basics in proper goal setting in a child. The importance of setting goals is well-known, but the majority of parents and educationalists tend to neglect giving it the focus it deserves. As a result, youngsters waste much of their lives searching for the elusive will o' the wisp called happiness, and are old before they even know what they actually wanted. The bitterness and frustration of the aged is there for all to see. The avid urge to not grow old is also a result of not having lived a life of fulfillment.

The four Purusharthas automatically make a person ethical, because Dharma is the first Purushartha. It is embedded in the subconscious that Dharma will lead to Artha – they will prosper, if they are righteous and God fearing. It is also embedded in the psyche that even though Artha helps us to obtain Kama, we have to transcend Kama and reach Moksha; so Kama is just a stepping stone for something higher. It is not the goal

of life. Another invaluable input we get is that we don't need to stoop to wrongdoing to get material benefits or the objects of our desire!

The Advaita Vedanta is the principle of non-dualism, which says that only the Brahman or Atma exists. It is the substratum of reality upon which everything else is superimposed like a mirage. Advaita Vedanta states that liberation can be achieved in this life. The cycle of rebirth is something that is a matter of faith, but here, we get the immediate benefit of being mentally unburdened. To be free from sorrow, free from fear, and free from anxiety is true liberation.

This freedom can come only when we no longer identify with our body. It is only when we identify with the body that we feel fear (whether it is fear of death or of some situation), sorrow, or worry. For example, thousands die every day, but it is only the death of a loved one that causes sorrow. We worry only about people we love, or about ourselves. All these are connected to the body, to an individual. Practicing Dharma gradually leads us to the conviction that our body and mind and wealth and loved ones are not the be all and end all in life. Our duty extends beyond them; and these are all for living in an ethical manner, because the Atma in all is the same as our own Atma; and the Atma is separate from the body; and it is unborn and imperishable.

Actually, there is only one Purushartha, and that is *sukha* – happiness, utter contentment and peace. Dharma gives us happiness and we feel a deep peace that we have done the right thing, so that makes Dharma a Purushartha. Artha gives us satisfaction and comfort, so Artha is a Purushartha. Artha helps us to get Kama, and the fulfillment of desires gives happiness and comfort, so Kama is a Purushartha. Having obtained all we desire, the only desire left is to be free of all desires, and this is Moksha, so Moksha is the *param purusha* (supreme achievement) of life.

The four Purusharthas exist at different levels of our existence. Artha provides physical *sukha*, Kama provides mental *sukha*, and Dharma brings intellectual *sukha*. Yet, all three are dependent on other factors and a person who has them is bound to them for *sukha*. The only true, independent *sukha* is Moksha. It is also the only enduring *sukha* and it is

a sukha that is always experienced no matter where we are or what condition we are in, because conditions are connected to the body and we have acquired a sense of being detached from even our body. The prospect of death or illness or physical discomfort no longer arouses the kind of fear it once did. We feel that since we are the Atma of all, death is just a transition and suffering is as fleeting as a bout of flu.

Whether a person reaches the level of the Moksha Purushartha or not, having this system at the back of our mind helps us lead a better, more satisfying life. We are less inclined to chase temporal power and material success. We will be more considerate and pleasant in our interaction with others, give thought to what is right and wrong, rather than allow the impulse of the moment to lead us to wrong acts. We will be more balanced in all we do. Even a poor person will not easily abandon Dharma, even if he does not prosper financially. If desires are thwarted, he will have the patience to wait until they are granted, or else the desired object is desired no more.

Some people say that the actual meaning of the four Purusharthas is that if you do Dharma, you get the Artha of spiritual merit. If you get the wealth of spiritual merit, you get the desire – Kama – for the Ishwara (with form) or the (formless) Brahman. And, when the desire for the Brahman – or the Lord – is fulfilled, you are liberated from all sorrow in this life, and also from rebirth after death.

Yoga

Yoga means union; to be yoked (to the Atma or Brahman). There is some confusion regarding the meaning, when people understand it to mean Yogic exercises, or meditation, and nothing more. These are the eight parts recommended by Maharshi Patanjali, in his Yoga Sutra, or Ashtanga Yoga, as it is generally known.

Maharshi Patanjali's Yoga takes a person up to Samadhi in eight steps. These are: yama, niyam, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, Samadhi. Plenty of books are available for anyone who wants to know about them in depth. This is a basic introduction about the logical application of concentrated effort for the specific purpose of experiencing a state of complete freedom from the world and from one's mind.

Yama means control of the senses. Niyama means self imposed rules for restraining mental reactions, and the rituals to be done daily. Asana means Yogic exercises to maintain good health and curb violent emotions like desire and anger, and reduce lethargy or restlessness. Pranayama are breath control exercises that play a major role in mental and physical health. Pratyahara means withdrawing the mind from everything that is negative. Dharana means to bring the mind back repeatedly to one object. Dhyana is meditation and Samadhi is deep meditation. There are different levels of Samadhi which we need not go into, but the drawback in this system is that the world rushes into our lives as soon as we come out of the Samadhi.

The Yoga of the Gita is about attaching the mind to the Lord while living in the world. It speaks of two kinds of Yogas, Gnan Yoga and Karma Yoga. Karma Yoga encompasses Bhakti Yoga, which is considered a third path that takes a person to the Lord, and Gnan Yoga encompasses the Sankhya Yoga (which is not the same as the Sankhya philosophy of Kapil). At the end, one leads to the other. When we have Gnan about the Lord, we can't help loving Him and serving Him with devotion.

The purpose of Yoga is that the Lord should be always in our mind whatever we do, and all we do is done as a worship of the One who abides in all. This enables a person to live on a plane that is rich with emotion, having the courage of conviction for all that is right. It helps us overcome fear of death and fear of suffering. It helps us to not get confused by the different considerations and options we are forced to face. It helps achieve a steady progress (in spite of lapses or regressions) towards a higher goal, and at the same time, help others to lead righteous lives, overcoming temptations and weaknesses.

A person who has tried to be attached to a higher power will always have an advantage over others less fortunate, because when he is most in need of help, he will find an inner strength he never knew he had.

Although the Ashtanga Yoga does not give the ultimate achievement of Moksha, it makes one eligible for spiritual enlightenment, because all the eight steps are essential and vital for the self control and detachment that is needed for a person to attain enlightenment. It helps us to live in this world and work in this world without being attached to our actions, or being affected by the things that happen. Such a life carries one higher until we reach liberation from rebirth, and liberation from sorrow. 'Lastly, it is imperative that all these various Yogas should be carried out in practice; mere theories about them will not do any good. First we have to hear about them, then we have to think about them. We have to reason the thoughts out, impress them on our minds and we have to meditate on them, realize them until at last, they become our whole life. No longer will religion remain a bundle of ideas or theories, nor an intellectual assent; it will enter into our very self. By means of intellectual assent we may today subscribe to many foolish things, and change our minds altogether tomorrow. But true religion never changes. Religion is realization; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion.'

(Extract from 'The Goal' by Swami Vivekananda.)

Sanskaras.

Sanskaara means the subtle impressions that are left on the subconscious by the experiences and actions of a person. Sanskaras come from innumerable bygone lifetimes. They contribute to an individual's personality and inclinations. This is the cause for children having different temperaments and aptitudes even when they are brought up together, born of the same parents.

Sanskaras are good and bad. It is said that when we do something good, all our good sanskaras awaken to reinforce the good in us, and the same is true for the bad sanskaras. So, we are adjured to always choose the good, and discard the wrong, no matter how minor a wrong it may be. This principle gives a logical explanation for our instinctive likes and dislikes of people and places.

Not only people, but even places have their sanskaras. There have been reports of a group of priests who were saying their prayers when a unanimous feeling of violence arose in them all. This unusual phenomenon was puzzling enough for them to investigate the history of their new premises, and it was discovered that a slaughterhouse existed at that site long ago. The vibrations of peace and calm in a temple are also the result of the sanskaras of the place. It is a fairly common experience to go somewhere for the first time, and get the feeling that we have seen this place before.

The Vedas prescribe rituals, called sanskaras, at various stages in our lives, because these rituals leave beneficial subtle impressions and remove, to some extent, adverse impressions. The first sanskara is the *garbhaadhaana sanskaara* (the sanskara of implanting the seed in the womb). In earlier times, astrologers would select an auspicious date and time for the bridegroom to implant his seed in his bride's womb. Songs would be sung, and the whole family would celebrate the occasion. The newly weds had the feeling that they were coming together with the blessings of God, and that the child who would be born of this union would be a healthy child and a noble person. This made the conjugal act a ritual, instead of a lustful activity.

The next sanskara is the *punsavana sanskaara* that is done when the mother is five months pregnant. This made the family aware that they were to nurture the unborn soul in every way – physically and spiritually.

Then comes the *seemantopanayan sanskaara* when the woman is seven months pregnant. In this, the child's father combs his wife's hair and assures her that he will take care of her, and cherish her during the pregnancy, delivery, and later.

The *jaatakarma sanskaara* is done just after the baby is born, and is meant to arouse the good inclinations from past lives and remove negative influences.

The *naamakaran sanskaara* (naming ceremony) comes after that. It is supposed to be done within the first six days. It is recommended that the child is given a meaningful name, preferably starting with one of the letters recommended in the child's horoscope. The name has a considerable effect on the child's mentality and self image. Our ancient Rishis knew more psychology than we can even imagine. They knew that a girl called 'Laxmi' would develop grace and contentment subconsciously, and a girl named 'Sarasvati' would give due importance to learning and wisdom without being taught. A boy called 'Vijay' would be self confident, assured of success, whereas a boy called 'Vinay' would have humility and be inclined to be courteous.

Boys from the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya castes are given the *yagyopaveeta sanskaara* – the thread ceremony. This includes receiving the famous Gayatri Mantra. This powerful mantra awakens the right kind of intellect and is beneficial in every way. A triple thread is worn by the boy, slung over the right shoulder. This is a constant reminder that three gunas (tendencies) constantly influence our psyche, and we must rise above them, and lead a life of pure aspiration.

The next important sanskara is the *vivaaha sanskaara* – the marriage ceremony. It binds two people in a life of mutual aspiration, service to family and society, and restraining sensuality to one partner.

Death is also a sanskara, since the soul lives on when the body perishes. The *shraaddha* (last rites and offerings to the ancestors) done for the

departed soul builds up *shraddha* (faith) in the person who does the *shraaddha*, that there is life after death. Rituals are done up to the thirteenth day, then monthly, then after three months, six months, and the death anniversary. After that, the family feed Brahmins on the lunar date of death, during the fortnight called *pitri paksha* (the fortnight of the ancestors) that comes before the celebrations of Navratri and Diwali. The spirits of the ancestors bless the clan, and it has been seen that remembering the ancestors, due to whom we exist, is beneficial for our peace and prosperity.

These practices contribute considerably to the spiritual strength of Hindus. The effect is too subtle to be calculated or measured scientifically as yet, but there is no doubt the research would show the benefits. I would urge people everywhere – whatever religion they belong to – to adopt this conscientious creation of positive inputs, and allow their culture to be enhanced by gratitude for the gifts received from known and unknown sources, creating the awareness that we are born to evolve spiritually as well as advance in worldly ways.

If a person is ill mannered, it is said, ‘He lacks *sanskaras*’. Hence, in common parlance, the word *sanskara* also indicates the culture of a person. It is our culture to bow down to elders and get their blessings. I believe that had this practice prevailed in the West, there would be fewer old people’s homes, and fewer juvenile delinquents. Even in India, the people who are reluctant to look after their aged parents are generally those who have lost touch with our age-old *sanskaras*. Such people make others unhappy. They lack the inner peace and resilience that is the strength of so many who lack other advantages and amenities.

The *sanskaras* mentioned above are the Vedic *sanskaras*. Others have come into practice, depending upon social, geographical and political considerations. These include the many rituals in the major ceremonies. It is customary to invite close relatives and friends to every ritual. Even today, many Marwari families continue to have a Muslim lady to make the *chunri* (a stole worn over the sari on formal occasions) for a bride, and to make her wear bangles made of lac. Obviously, this was a social custom created in the past few centuries, to develop goodwill and

harmony; whereas the Vedic sanskaras are much older. The rituals, religious and social, all create sanskaras. Some may have outgrown their utility, but there are many that are significant, and need to be understood if their potential benefits are to enter our lives.

Gratuities From My Guru.

As a happily married young woman, with two lovely children and every conceivable blessing in life, I would feel a bit guilty, when I saw the enormous suffering in the world. The iniquities would bother me, and the phrase, ‘There, but for the Grace of God, go I’, would often spring to mind. People would laugh at me, whenever I spoke of these feelings, telling me that I was a fool to complain about being happy! They said I should just be grateful for the gifts of fortune, and stop bothering my head about things beyond my control.

Their comments did not give any satisfaction. Nor was Julie Andrew’s song, ‘I must have done something good’, enough to satisfy me, even though the law of Karma did seem logical.

My Guruji smiled, when I placed the matter to him. He ruffled my hair lovingly, and said, ‘What will you have, except a heart full of sorrow, if you gather the sorrow of the world into it? And, what else can you spread, apart from sorrow, if you have nothing but sorrow in your heart? Be happy, my child, and spread happiness!’ I decided then and there that I would do my utmost to reject despondency and do whatever possible – in every way possible – to spread happiness, peace, laughter, harmony and comfort.

This is a magic formula.

You can try it and see!

The more I tried to spread happiness, the happier I became. My focus was on (spreading) joy, instead of the suffering in the world. The suffering I saw served to prompt me into using my time and energy proactively. Seeing others laugh made me joyful.

Every being is attracted to happy people. My relations with others improved, and I felt less bothered about the petty things which earlier seemed so hurtful. My feeling of helplessness turned into moderated optimism. Instead of gloom, I began to spread cheer. This had a visibly beneficial effect on me and others around me.

It is a fact that there are some people who resent the happiness of others. I couldn’t help noticing this, and it confused me and troubled me. Yet

the formula – *'khush raho, khushee baanto'* – prevented me from being bogged down by the negative attitudes which cropped up now and again.

It was from Shri Krishnashankar Shastriji that I came across another magic formula. 'Don't expect anything for what you do. Do what you feel you should do, without expecting any return. If you cannot get free of expectations, refuse to do the work. All problems arise because of our expectations.'

It took me a long time, a great deal of resolution, and a considerable struggle with myself, before I could begin to practice it. At first, I had to hide my disappointment (when I felt let down by people). I had to pretend, even to myself, that I was not hurt. Gradually, this pretense became the truth, and I started to understand the importance of prayer.

My Guruji clarified this so logically! Belief in God went out of fashion with the advance in science. Even today, when so many scientists are of the opinion that some logical power has to be behind the extraordinarily complicated and accurate mechanism of the cosmos, the majority still shy away from admitting the possibility of a 'Higher Power'. They don't mind calling it 'the X factor', but get inordinately passionate in their objections, if the word 'God' is mentioned anywhere. It is hilariously illogical that the very people for whom an open mind is of vital importance in a search for Truth should have such closed minds. The mindset of such people is almost paranoid, and pathological in their vehemence! They say, 'If God exists, prove it!' They may be told, 'Prove that He doesn't exist!' Such illogical debating would be just a waste of breath, however, and it is far more constructive to see whether we benefit more by having faith, or by rejecting a belief in an Almighty who is just, supremely benevolent and yet not whimsical or illogical. Ironically, they do 'touch wood' for good luck!

'Har vyaktikaa vyavahaara apane` apane` gnan ke` anussar hotaa hai. The behavior of every individual is in keeping with his/her level of knowledge.'

What a fantastic summary of the myriad of reasons for people's behavior and attitudes! It takes some digesting, but as one begins to understand the implications, it becomes so much easier to understand why people react so differently, even in almost identical situations. Knowledge is connected to wisdom, and also to restraint. If we have the knowledge that it is wrong to hit people when we are angry, we will try to control ourselves; but if we believe that it is all right to hit someone who irritates us, we will not hesitate to hit anyone we feel angry with! Also, we lose most of our anger/hurt/indignation, as soon as we come to understand that the other person was driven willy-nilly into behaving in a way we found hurtful. We don't get angry with the sea when a wave knocks us over; nor do we get angry with our little child who hits out when we hold his hands, because he needs to be given an injection. In the same way, we find it much easier to forgive others if we know that they were also victims of their own lack of a proper understanding or self control.

Most unhappiness is caused by misunderstanding. This formula, given by my Guru, helped me enormously, because I was saved from much emotional pain because I remembered his words whenever someone behaved in a hurtful way.

'Manushya kaa jeevan milaa hai to kuch karke` jaao; varna apnaa pe`t to kutte` aur billi bhi bhar le`te` hain. You have been given a human birth, so use it for doing something good in the world. Even dogs and cats feed themselves; unless you do something more worthwhile than looking after yourself (and those you consider yours), your potential remains unfulfilled.'

Most thought-provoking! I felt quite diffident when I realized that most of us – myself included – thought only about our own pleasure and profit! It prodded me towards thinking about what I can do to make my life more fruitful. My focus shifted from my own petty problems to the far greater genuine suffering in the world. The first effect of this was that I realized how much I had to be thankful for. My problems were shown to be miniscule by comparison. Instead of brooding (and coming

close to depression) I became proactive and grateful for what I had. God alone knows how much my efforts helped others; but I know very well that I derived the maximum benefits in trying to help others!

‘Achche` sanskaara achhe` karmake` binaa nahien padate`. Good acts are needed to create good subtle impressions on the sub-conscious.’

This explains why ritualism is recommended, popular, and effective. It is quite true that we are more committed to something for which we have put in some effort, or made some sacrifice. A mother, who has stayed up night after night with her sick baby, will have a greater depth of love for her child than the mother of a baby who has been brought up by someone else. God seems quite remote when we merely picture Him in some unseen realm; but those who worship an image, idol, or any other symbols (like a cross one can hold, or a book one can read), are far more likely to experience Him as a tangible reality. To them, He does not seem as inaccessible as He seems to most of us. We will definitely have a greater empathy for a beggar if we give one some food or clothing occasionally, than if we do nothing but grumble that begging should not be permitted.

Once I asked my Swamiji why God gives insanity to some people. Surely, being mad is the worst of afflictions, isn't it? Maharajji's answer was beautiful. I give it here, to the best of my memory.

‘When a person's *vaasanaa* (avid desires) are uncontrolled for several lifetimes, he becomes utterly incapable of dealing with them. Then, God gives him one life of not being in his senses. This erases the *sanskaara* (subtle impressions caused by past experiences) to a manageable extent, and then he is able to get a fresh start in his next life. It is a mistake to think that a person we call mad suffers greatly. We see that many mad people are quite happy. They do not think that there is anything wrong with them. It is the others around them, who suffer, and they suffer because of their karma. God is too compassionate to allow anyone to suffer without a purpose.’

One day, the discourse was on the benefits of listening to Satsang – discourses and discussions on spiritual matters, or the Shastras, or about the Lord. The exact meaning is to associate with the saintly people who know the Sat (ultimate truth; God). Maharajji said, ‘It is only by the Lord’s Grace that we get a chance to get Satsang.’ That brought a new thought – are deaf people deprived of the Lord’s Grace?

I put that question to Maharajji. Instead of ridiculing my childish question, he answered gently and lovingly. His answers were always concise, compassionate, and deeply satisfying. ‘No, my child,’ he said. ‘The Lord has Graced them by making them deaf.’ Maharajji smiled when he saw that I was totally confused. ‘You see, most of our likes and dislikes stem from things we hear. Our mind gets sullied when we listen to the things that are negative and detrimental to mental peace or constructive attitudes. We waste our time in thinking fruitlessly about the things we cannot help. A deaf person is saved from this. He has greater scope to use his time and mind on things that are soothing and beneficial. If he can’t hear the Satsang, he can read books. Even if he can’t read, he can see the Lord’s picture or image, and pray. His handicap leads to humility, and humility is needed for peace of mind, because it is our ego that is hurt by most of the blows we face.’

A short and sweet, simple story told by Maharajji will appeal to whoever reads this book. Maharajji said that when this beautiful world was created, and the jeeva was sent into it for a sojourn. He asked the Lord, ‘Lord, You have made the world so beautiful that I am afraid that I may forget You, once I go there.’

‘Don’t worry, My child,’ said the Lord. ‘In the substance of your mind, I have added an ingredient called ‘*dukha*’ (sorrow). It will always remain with you, until you come back to Me. I placed it there to ensure that you return to Me ultimately.’

‘So, when *dukha* comes into your life, don’t regret it; remember that it is a reminder from that Almighty, and be grateful that you have been

reminded that He is your goal, and all else is transient,' said Maharajji. Sorrow thus became a reassuring reminder of Grace since then.

One day I had got very angry with a servant who was being deliberately negligent in his duties. I scolded him sharply, and later felt bad that I had lost my temper and said harsh things. I asked Maharajji what I should do, because it is impossible to not scold people who tend to shirk their work; discipline must be maintained, to run a house or an office.

'Don't you scold your children?' asked Maharajji. I got the message! He didn't have to say anything more! What he wanted me to understand is that scolding is all right, when it is done with goodwill and a good intention, without having any aversion for the person or desire to punish! It also told me that I must have as much concern for the welfare of others, as I do for my children. The extent of personal involvement can never be the same, but the basic outlook should be that of a caring mother who understand and helps the child to improve even when she chastises him for the sake of improving him.

While speaking on haste/ procrastination, Maharajji told us a beautiful formula for the positive utilization of both. Whereas balance is the essence in all things, he said that when we think of doing something bad, in a fit of temper, we should procrastinate, and postpone doing it till the next day. Most such impulses arise out of a hurt, and soon pass off if ignored. If the impulse is a good impulse, it should be done immediately, because the impulse to do good deeds also passes off if ignored! What a wonderful formula for improving our lives!

Gnan

Gnan is generally considered to be either knowledge or enlightenment.

Our Mahatmas have said that there are three kinds of Gnan.

One is the *pratyaksha gnaana*, the knowledge that is obtained through our senses or through experiments and observation. One is the knowledge that can be procured by personal experience, the *aparoksha gnaana*, which cannot be proved (or disproved) by any known method. This Gnan is like the awareness of happiness, or sorrow, or any other emotion, or a spiritual experience. The third is the *paroksha gnan*, of that which is unseen. For example, the existence of Heaven, or life after death, or the existence of what C.G.Jung referred to as the collective consciousness, the existence of premonition or intuition, and the existence of God.

Atheists scoff at the reports of mystics who have had visions. They feel that all such experiences are hallucinations. Indeed, many of them could well be hallucinations, but it can never be proved that all such experiences are definitely nothing more than hallucinations. Nor can it be proved that the experiences in deep meditation are also tricks played by the subconscious mind!

We only have to reflect on how we ‘know’ that it is wrong to inflict suffering, and ‘right’ to give comfort. What proof is there, that being truthful, kind, honest, loyal, upright, etc are good values; and that murder, tyranny, robbery, rape, torture, deceit, etc are wrong? Can anyone prove that they have a stomach ache, or that the sight of the full moon gives them pleasure?

One can argue that we know right from wrong because of the affect on society. Doesn’t the same argument hold good for having faith in a higher power that is benevolent, loving and merciful? If a personal ‘feeling’, like happiness at the sight of a loved one is valid, so is the feeling of peace and comfort of a prayer. These are subjective emotions, or perceptions. One cannot be justified in accepting the ones that suit us as valid, and the ones that don’t suit us as invalid!

Can anyone say that it is wrong to give psychological therapy to a depressed person? Isn't spiritual psychology also a kind of therapy? If you say that it is escapism, I ask you, is it not escapism when a man takes a drink to steady his nerves, get rid of loneliness, or drive away his fears? Is it OK to use positive imaging, but wrong to say, 'God does everything for the best'?

The fact is that anything that has a positive effect can become detrimental unless used wisely. It is the same with Gnan, and it is the same with alcohol. It is the same with religion, and it is the same with psychological therapy.

I believe that some of the recommendations of organized religion are basically therapeutic. For example, chanting a mantra, doing the rosary, giving alms, rendering community service or service to the church/temple/mosque. I believe that fasts were recommended not only as a discipline, but also to make us realize what hunger is like; to value the food we get, and learn to be grateful for it. I also believe that fasting helps maintain better health, provided it is done sensibly. It reminds us of those who long for the food we take for granted.

I believe that the Jewish and Muslim practice of halal or kosher meat was introduced to curtail the harmful effects of red meat eaten in excess, because the climate in the Mid-East made it difficult to obtain fruits and vegetables. If this is true, it would be useful to find out which of our ancient customs are based on health, and which are based on actual spiritual purpose.

The Gita mentions Gnan and *vignana*. In common parlance, vignan means science. However, in spiritual usage, vignan means the application of our knowledge (or understanding) in our daily life. It is Gnan to know that we should speak the truth; it is vignan to actually stick to the truth, and not lie when convenient! When we ignore Gnan and do not put it into practice, then we invite all kinds of unpleasant repercussions that are quite obvious to us all, regardless of where we live or who we are.

So, coming back to Gnan, science has steadily been establishing much of what is written in the Shastras. Since we consider ourselves to be

thinking beings, it is foolishly unthinking to wait for these facts to be proved at random, by chance. I wish our scientists would read the ancient scriptures and see the extent of truth in the writings. For example, the PCRM (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine) comprises of eminent medical experts who have established that meat, milk and eggs are a major cause of colon cancer. Is it impossible that the Sages of yore understood the effects of different foods and made religious stipulations to keep people healthy?

It was in about 1971 that a psychologist friend showed me an article in an American magazine that gave details of a baby in the womb responding to external stimuli. ‘But this is also written in the Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana’, I told her. We discussed how this ancient scripture has given details of the development of a fetus in the womb from day one, to the process of birth. It is difficult to accept that the ancient Rishis has such intricate knowledge, that medical science has taken several thousand years to give to us!

Now, the main point of Gnan is how we use it, or misuse it, or don’t use it. Again, this is where spiritual psychology comes in. To misuse what we have is ‘wrong’; no rational person can disagree with that. Nor can any rational human say that it is not right to use well what we have. ‘To use well’ does not mean self-indulgence and hoarding. It means for the benefit of as many as possible, for our self and for others. To not use it is a waste, not only of what we have, but also of our God-given intellect! So, making good use of all we have also becomes a part of Gnan; an intellectual awareness of prudence that cannot be proved by any other method than inference, instinct, or what we call our conscience! The Gita says, ‘*Gnaana vignaana triptaatmaa*’ – the Atma experiences complete content when the person has Gnan and vignan (applied Gnan). Very often it happens that we are absolutely convinced about the rightness of something, calling it our ‘gut feeling.’ It is equally possible that a strong conviction or hallucination seems to be a message from a higher power. How can one be sure which message is from God, and which is the prompting of our own fervor? My Guruji gave a simple test. ‘That, which benefits all beings, is God’s voice; and that, which benefits

only a limited group and harms others, is prompted by individual fervor.’

In that case, the ultimate Gnan is to know what is beneficial and what is harmful for us individually and collectively. It will infuriate any number of people that the obvious conclusion I come to, is that those who reject the higher values or the concept of a benevolent power that rules creation, are certainly lacking in Gnan to some extent, even though they may be considered geniuses in their field. There is no doubt that the so called ‘men of God’ have done more than anyone else, to make people lose faith in God, but that is no reason for an intelligent person to discard the experiences of those who were honest and sincere and enlightened. It is like refusing to use electricity because some people died of shock. It is like throwing out the baby with the bath water. It is to behave like the ostrich who bury their heads in the sand, thinking that if they can’t see the approaching person, he can’t see them either!

And that, my dear, is certainly not Gnan!

The paroksha Gnan is given by the Vedas and the Shastras. They establish the ultimate reality, the substratum of all creation, as the Brahman, declaring the interactive world to be a superimposition; an illusion; Maya. To obtain this Gnan, we must have faith in the Vedas, and have bhakti for the Ishwara, and lead a pure and simple life, striving for the subtle mind to become limpid so that we can have an aparoksha experience of the non-dual truth. We must believe that Saints and Mystics have experienced this, and that there is something beyond the limits of what can be proved by science or physics. The Gnan of the Vedas is called the *apaurushe`ya gnaana*, because it is not given at any point in time, at any place, or by any individual. It is the ultimate knowledge of the ultimate reality, the Brahman, the Atma, and the Atma that abides in all.

To dismiss the possibility of the existence of what we cannot disprove, is neither rational nor prudent. And, when all is said and done, of what use is Gnan unless it is used for universal benefit?

The Gita

The Gita, or the Bhagwat Gita is a world famous treatise that gives an impeccable philosophy for life. It is valid for all people at all times, regardless of age, sex, country, era, or background. There is no narrow religious focus. Although it gives emphasis on faith in the Almighty, it gives even more emphasis to using our God-given intelligence, and using our powers of discrimination to decide what is right in any given situation.

The Gita is a part of the Mahabharata. This great epic depicts the eternal battle between right and wrong. The Kauravas and Pandavas are first cousins. Both have good qualities and weaknesses. The Kauravas wish to cheat the Pandavas of their legitimate share in the Kingdom. Ultimately, there is a great war at Kurukshetra, in which Krishna is Arjuna's charioteer. Krishna is Arjuna's cousin and friend. Arjuna has implicit faith in Krishna, but when he sees so many loved ones standing on the side of the enemy, ready to kill or be killed by him, he is confused as to what is right and proper.

I write about the Gita with great trepidation, because it is so profound that even after reading it any number of times, listening to discourses, and reading commentaries by people with great depth, I still feel incapable of explaining it. It is extraordinarily amazing that despite this, it never fails to give help, peace and guidance, even if I read (or recall) just a couple of favorite verses! The only reason I am writing about the Gita at all, is that I want to urge every human being to read it and gain the benefits. Mahatma Gandhi said that the Gita was his mother. He would open it whenever he was perplexed and uncertain, and get guidance, help and comfort from the Gita. Some of the commentaries are too technical and ponderous to interest a new comer, but the commentaries by Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Maharajji, and Swami Vivekananda are ones that will interest and fascinate whoever wants to get some idea.

The Gita starts with Arjuna's dejection at the thought of killing people who he loved and revered. Arjuna was a seasoned warrior. He knew

fully well what war entailed. He burned with the injustice, humiliation and danger faced by the Pandavas ever since they lost their father at an early age. Their mother brought the five small boys to her husband's elder brother, asking to be sheltered. Ever since that time they had been at the mercy of the unscrupulous Duryodhan, the son of their blind uncle Dhritarashtra, who was completely under the thumb of his greedy son.

Duryodhan had no intention of giving the Pandavas even a small portion of the Kingdom that was theirs by right. Not even the great Patriarch Bhishma could influence him in any way. Yudhishthira, the eldest brother of the Pandavas, compelled Bhima, Arjuna, and the twins Nakul and Sahdev to endure Duryodhan's tyranny, until things came to a head. So, Arjuna came mentally prepared to kill whoever opposed them in a righteous war, because he knew that this was a war – not for personal profit – but for Dharma.

Even so, his affection for his loved ones overcame his better judgment when he saw them lined up, ready to kill or be killed. He was momentarily confused about what is right, and deluded about his duty and loyalty. He had full faith in Krishna, and yet he told Krishna that he was not prepared to fight.

Shri Krishna added to Arjuna's confusion by bombarding him with the highest philosophy and seeming contradictions. Arjuna was forced to use his brain and place his arguments. Shri Krishna's masterly exposition of a timeless philosophy (which is also applied psychology) helps clarify the perplexities of people at varying stages of mental and spiritual development.

As I have understood the matter, an emotional crisis is needed for us to question and understand the truths of life. The Sankya Yoga given in the second chapter sounds delightful and soothes the mind, but needs to be understood through a dialectic process.

The third chapter gives us a glimmering about the right way to work. It analyzes what work is, the types of work and their results; as well as how to work without getting the good and bad fruits. In the fourth chapter, the Lord explains why He takes birth and why He works. He teaches us how all work can be a Yagya – a worship of the Almighty

that benefits Nature and all beings. It also tells us the kind of attitude we should have if we wish to obtain knowledge, and be free of sin. The fifth chapter analyses Sanyas (renunciation of worldly consideration). The sixth chapter is the last of the first of the three divisions of six chapters each, as analyzed by commentators. External and internal Yoga (being attached to the Brahman) is explained in brief, because Yoga must be holistic to be complete.

The seventh chapter starts with analyzing Gnan and vighnan (applied Gnan). It is imperative to live the truth. Unless knowledge is used, it is useless! The Lord also describes His presence in everything in the world, saying that He is the cotton thread that holds together the necklace made of cotton (Creation) beads. He is the seed of all species, the intellect, strength, and charisma in people. He declares Himself to be the urge for procreation where the urge is not contrary to Dharma! He speaks of His Maya – His power of delusion and Creation – and the four kinds of approaches that those who approach Him have. He says that the Gnani is dearest to Him, but see the magnanimity of the Lord! He says that all who approach Him are magnanimous, because it is He they ask, for what they want! It is like the mother who is thankful that her child has asked her, rather than a neighbor, for what he wants! He concludes this chapter by saying that those who surrender to Him and do good deeds need not fear death. The eighth chapter is about what happens to the jeevatma (the Atma attached to the body) after the body expires. Then, in the ninth chapter, the Lord tells us how He is everything, even that which is contradictory. He is leading us step by step, towards understanding His supreme, all-pervading magnificence. The tenth chapter is called the ‘Vibhuti Yoga’, explaining how we can yoke ourselves with Him by seeing Him in everything. He gives Arjuna a vision of His cosmic form in the eleventh chapter, and even the verbal description is thrilling and awesome. It stuns the reader, and we get a glimpse of the impact it would have had on Arjuna.

This electrifying experience is needed to prepare the reader to have the humility and faith to absorb the description, in the twelfth chapter, of what a bhakta (devotee) of the Almighty should be like, because

shraddhaa (deep faith) is essential for spiritual progress and total surrender. It is the natural consequence that a devotee needs to understand the inner drives and compulsions that hamper him. So, in the thirteenth chapter, the Lord speaks about the Kshetra (the field, that is the body and mind), and the Kshetrasya (the Atma in the individual, the eternal witness, who is a part of the Paramatma but does not know it fully). The seeker is being taught how to detach himself from his own mind and body, and attach himself to the Supreme. To succeed in this, we have to understand the three gunas – the tendencies of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas that alternate and keep the mind captive, and controlled by Prakriti. This is clarified in the fourteenth chapter. Prakriti and Maya are two names for the Lord's power of delusion and creation. We have to rise above the natural tendencies that restrict spiritual progress. Only then can we get a glimpse of the Purushottam – the most superior Purush – the Paramatma who abides in all, who is our very Self! The fifteenth chapter is called the 'Purushottam Yoga'. It begins by describing a tree with roots in the air and branches (with leaves) hanging down. This tree symbolizes a human being. The head (intellect) is on top, and the branches (limbs) hang down, along with the leaves and flowers that hide its ugly, barren reality. The tree is also the world, and is eternal, unless cut with the axe of detachment. The earlier formulas of dispassionate work are explained, so that we comprehend fully, and live accordingly, without having any doubts about what is right, and we can see the essence of the Lord in all creation.

Since the beings in creation have *daivee* (godly) as well as *aasuree* (demonic) tendencies, the sixteenth chapter clarifies them for us. The seventeenth chapter analyses how everything has its own guna (latent tendency), with its own effect on us, including asceticism and charity. The eighteenth chapter is a revision of all that Shri Krishna has said. It is a long chapter, and at the end, the Lord asks Arjuna whether he had understood everything and whether he has any more doubts. He also tells Arjuna to decide, and do whatever he thinks is right. This is the free choice the Lord has granted to mankind.

Arjuna represents us, human beings, whose values have not been obliterated by worldly considerations. Shri Krishna represents the pure intellect that tells us what is right. The chariot is the physical body, the horses are our senses, and the reins that control the horses are will power. The battle is on an internal level, between what is pleasant and what is proper. The goal is the goal of life, to overcome our own frailties and reach the supreme Atma. The powerful warriors of the enemy are the negative tendencies that fight with our loftier inclinations.

This is a battle that is fought at 'Kurukshetra' – the *kshe`tra`* (region) of karma. That means, it is in this interactive world that we have to fight and overcome our own baser self. The Gita is not a philosophy of escapism. It does not recommend giving up the world, or giving way out of weakness. Ten days of the war were over when Arjuna was overcome by his partiality for the people he loved. That means, our attachments rise up suddenly, and we stand in danger of being diverted from our goal, unless guided by pure intellect and eternal values.

Apart from Arjuna, two others heard the Gita. One was Sanjay, the noble charioteer and adviser of Dhritarashtra, and the other was the blind Dhritarashtra himself. Before the war began, Dhritarashtra had pleaded with Veda Vyas (the Sage who wrote the Mahabharata, and by whose grace Dhritarashtra and his brother Pandu were born) that he wanted to get a direct report of what was happening on the battlefield. He lacked the courage to see the events; he knew that it meant the destruction of his sons. So, he asked that Vyasji grant divine vision to Sanjay, and Sanjay would sit beside him and narrate everything. Sanjay also saw the Lord's cosmic form.

It is interesting to see the reactions of these three people, when the Gita had been spoken. Arjuna said, 'I have regained my memory, my understanding, by Your Grace, Krishna. I have no more doubts. I will do what You say.' Sanjay was an enlightened soul. He exulted in what he had seen and heard, knowing that Victory was, where the Yogeshwara Krishna and Arjuna (sincere effort) was. Dhritarashtra's lack of reaction reveals that the Gita had no affect on him. It was like water poured over a stone.

This is the concluding gift of the Gita to us. Its effect on us, when we read the Gita, will give an indication of our moral level. Do we react like Arjuna, or Sanjay, or don't we react at all, like Dhritarashtra? Well, we have to read the Gita to find out!

Conclusion

It is a fact that organized religion has its limitations and often outgrows the times, or is misrepresented into becoming counter-productive. That is why it is imperative that a person who seeks meaning in life and freedom from the strife all around understands the psychology of spiritual philosophy.

What is every creature looking for? In Sanskrit (and the languages that have descended from Sanskrit), it is called 'sukha'. The closest meaning in English would be a deep contentment, a mental ease that is full of peace, comfort and fulfillment. I often wonder whether this is the actual Holy Grail of the Bible.

The four Purusharthas are not really four; they all are sukha, at different levels. Artha (material wealth) is not a Purushartha in itself. It is a Purushartha because it enables one to get the sukha of physical comforts and pleasures. Dharma is not a Purushartha in itself either. The intellectual sukha it gives is the Purushartha. Kama (fulfillment of desire) is also a mental sukha, because desire is mental and the sukha is experienced in the mind when the desire is fulfilled. Moksha (liberation from rebirth) is the only real sukha, the only Purushartha, because it frees us from all suffering for ever.

The human being is considered the highest animal because the sukha sought by other creatures is limited to the body and mind (emotion). The intellect of other species does not aspire to the level of human aspiration. Even the loyalty and sacrifice of a dog is more instinctive and emotional than a mission undertaken after intellectual consideration.

In the same way there are levels of human evolution. A lowly man's Purushartha will be, perhaps, Kama or Artha. One who is more intellectual will probably opt for Dharma, because he will know that the fruits of Dharma endure, whereas the fruits of Kama and Artha are brief by comparison. The people who are at the highest level of human development will invariably desire Moksha.

Within these, comes the entire range of human desire and human achievement throughout the ages, and it will include the ones in the

future, because these are as basic as the five elements Creation is composed of. The Sages of yore understood basic human needs and nature, and simplified the methods of attaining them, and for progressing steadily towards the higher. To instill codes of conduct into the lives of all people – even those who were uneducated or lived in remote regions – they gave it the mantle of religion. The result of this was that every man governed himself with honesty, believing that God is in all hearts and sees everything, and wrongdoing will lead to terrible retribution. The concepts of Heaven and Hell are no different from the stick and carrot method used in society. The purpose was to lead people towards the good and induce them to discard the bad; to create a stable and prosperous society that lived ethically and in amity.

The sharp rise in atheism and religious intolerance has created anarchy and global strife. To police all people all the time is impossible; and there remains the question of who will police the police? Self governance, with every individual keeping a watch on his own actions and fearing to do wrong, is the perfect solution. Even if Heaven and Hell, and God Himself is a myth, it is well worth having such a myth rather than the violence and intolerance that is increasing frighteningly. Science fiction imagines attacks from aliens, but this attack from within is far more deadly for the human race and for all beings.

We seek to be happy, because bliss is our essence, and we cannot be happy if we are separated from our Self. We need to be conscious, to experience happiness, and so we have an inherent need for Gnan. Gnan can mean knowledge and it can mean the enlightenment that is the epitome of knowledge. Gnan needs to lead to happiness, if it is to mean anything. Hence, the concept of Sacchidananda. (Sat = existence + Chit = consciousness + anand = bliss. The nature of the Atma, the Brahman, that is the substratum of all creation, is Sacchidananda.) And, of course, we have to exist in order to know and experience!

Now, we want happiness. We want it at all times, at all places (wherever we are), we want to obtain it effortlessly, and we want it independently. The only way this is possible, is if our Self is bliss and we know what we are. This happiness cannot be enduring if it is connected to the little,

individual, mortal self. It can only be possible when we identify with the Self of all, the Brahman that has no beginning and no end and remains unchanging and un-fragmented.

This is the principle of Vedanta, of the Sanatan Dharma, and the school of thought we call 'Hinduism' for the sake of convenience.

This is also what all religions lead to, in different ways. Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa was a rustic with little formal education. However, he was an enlightened saint who inspired Swami Vivekananda (and so many others) and continues to inspire through his books and the learned Monks of the Ramakrishna Mission. He had experimented by practicing different religions, and came to the conclusion that they lead to the same ultimate experience of pure bliss.

And, that is the sukha we all seek.

This book is an attempt to pass on the clarifications that have helped me. It is based on my understanding of the purport of our Scriptures and the psychology behind them. As mentioned earlier, the Sanatan Dharma means eternal righteousness, and is for all people, in every place, and at any time. My understanding is based mainly on what I have heard from my Guru, who was an acknowledged exponent of our scriptures and highly regarded by the learned and the saintly.

Those who want to go deeper into our scriptures may consult the original texts and the commentaries by great exponents like my Guru, Swami Akhandanand Saraswati. Arguments, however forceful, may not lead to the realization of the Truth; and, without the guidance of enlightened souls, even knowledge becomes nothing more than an exercise in dialectics.

For Non-believers Only.

Question: What proof is there that God exists?

Answer: What proof is there that He doesn't?

Question: Lots of people don't believe in God but they are perfectly happy. Why do we need religion anyway?

Answer: Lots of orphans are perfectly happy too, but can anyone say that they wouldn't have been happier if they had parents? We need religion to understand the meaning of our existence, to give direction to our life, to help us rise above organized religion, to the level of pure spirituality.

Question: Belief in God has caused more bloodshed than any other belief.

Answer: It is not belief in God that has caused the bloodshed; the cause of friction is a confused concept of what people feel God wants. So, what is actually at the root of all strife are personal preferences, superimposed over the basic values given by all religions.

Question: Belief in God results in superstition.

Answer: Superstition is ingrained in people. Lots of atheists won't accept a hotel room No. 13, feel apprehensive if the day is a Friday and the date is the 13th of the month. People are unwilling to walk under a ladder; that is good common sense, but their reason is more superstition than logic. There are many such examples – for example, 'touch wood',

or ‘Good luck!’ After all, isn’t a belief in luck also a kind of superstition? It indicates that there is an unseen power that has control over us.

Is it fair to blame religion for people’s foibles?

Question: Belief in God makes a person weak and lazy. Religion is nothing but escapism.

Answer. Belief in God makes a person strong, active and ethical. People who use God as an excuse to shirk their work and responsibility don’t really believe in God. If they did, they would follow the basic strictures that lead us to moral strength and an unrelenting effort to serve all God’s creatures.

It takes courage to have faith; a weak person can’t trust an unseen power enough to face a materialistic world, and hold on to ethical values and higher principles. In fact, escapism is to deny the existence of a higher power that induces us to not shirk our duty, not fear hard work, and be true to the higher values even in face of temptation or adversity.

Escapism is to lose ourselves in temporary pleasure or distraction; even hard work for worldly gain. Spirituality helps us to focus on that, which is enduring, peace-giving, and beneficial for all.

Question: Priests are usually uncultured and full of wrong tendencies and revolting habits. They are often dirty, lack learning or culture, tell lies and are greedy. What sort of religion is this?

Answer. It is really rather childish to accept such people as representatives of a power that is perfect in every way. It is human nature to misuse power, and priests are human, too.

Actually, we should remember that there are priests who do the rituals to earn a living, and there are Monks who give up their lives for God. From

priests, we can – at best – expect learning, cleanliness and an ethical lifestyle.

Monks are also people who are struggling to overcome their human weaknesses. They are as prone to the same negative tendencies as any other human being, including favoritism, vanity, indulgences and greed. It is up to us to gauge the level of spirituality before we trust them enough to ask for their guidance. It is our fault if we choose an incompetent person to be our guide, misled by the garb he dons.

Religion is higher than any priest or Monk. It is up to the sincere seeker to study, listen and then evaluate right from wrong. Anything that does harm, causes hatred, or justifies unethical behavior is not – emphatically not – true religion!

Question: If God exists, why can't we see Him? You say that God is merciful, and all-powerful; then why is there so much suffering in the world?

Answer: There are many things that exist, which we can't see. Nor is God subject to any compulsion that He must be measurable by our instruments and accessible to our intellect! He is merciful and all-powerful, so He is at liberty to reveal Himself to those who have the capacity. It is like high voltage electricity that will burn out a small transformer. Only a transformer that has the capacity to take high voltage can be used.

Suffering is necessary for growth, however much we dislike it. Even an athlete has to suffer to build up his muscles! The fact that growing up is painful indicates that suffering brings benefits. Apart from the theory of Karma, or the seemingly whimsical cases that go beyond the scope of our understanding, this is the only logical rationale. I would go so far as to say that even the tragic suffering of people like Helen Keller, the Inquisition, wars, etc had a long term benefit in the upliftment of the human race, since it created an aversion to all tyranny and torture. None of us are in a position to say whether those who suffered had a debt to pay according to the law of Karma, or whether they attained salvation

because of what they went through. None of us can know from where they got the strength to face such unbearable suffering. We see people have nervous breakdowns over the loss of a job or the death of a loved one, or rejection by a loved one; things that pale into insignificance beside the very real suffering caused by natural calamities and misrule.

I am reminded of a little story about a man who was discussing the same topic with his barber, as he had himself shaved. They saw an unshaved Hippie with long hair pass by. The barber was quick to point him out, and ask his customer, 'Does the unshaved man with long hair prove that barbers don't exist?'

For Believers Only

- The Vedas say that the world is unreal. Even if we accept this, we have to live in the world, eat, drink, earn, love and die. We face hardship, sorrow, pain, joy, fear, hunger, and desire. So, how can we simply dismiss them all, and what meaning would life have?

When the Vedas say that the world is unreal, it means that the world is not the ultimate reality; it is transient, like a wave in the sea. Of course we have to live in the world and go through all the emotions and needs that are common to all beings. It is quite true that they cannot be dismissed as unreal, but it is equally true that they effect us less if we have the right perspective towards life.

We need to do some goal setting, before we can understand the purpose of life. Just as a child progresses from nursery school to post graduate education, we grow spiritually as we pass the different stages in life. A child's goals are limited, but they widen as the child grows, so do we desire simple pleasures at first, and then the deeper joys and satisfaction. We have to understand that the ultimate goal for all beings is an enduring happiness. It depends on the individual's maturity as to what consists of happiness for him, and how much he is prepared to sacrifice, to obtain it. The world is transient, so worldly happiness will also be transient. If we can shun the smaller pleasures for greater joys, we can progress towards the ultimate, enduring happiness that comes to us as soon as we set our target and start moving towards the Supreme in earnest.

- It is nice to hear about God, but worldly activities demand attention, and God seems far away while worldly matters seem more pressing. It is impossible to spend hours in prayers and meditation. So, how can we ever progress spiritually, unless we become Monks or Nuns?

Our Sages were expert psychologists. The Lord Shri Krishna has simplified the Shastras and served them on a platter, as it were, giving us the essence in the Gita, in a way that we can apply with comparative ease. The answer is that whatever we do, we should offer it up to the Almighty as a loving service.

When I first heard this startling suggestion from my Guru, I felt as though that would be a form of cheating. ‘I cook, sew, and do other things for my family and friends – how can I pretend that I am doing them for God?’ was the question that troubled my mind. Gradually, the understanding came, that I did all these things as my duty, and because I loved these people. Doing one’s duty is a form of worship, and loving is also worship. God abides in all. He has given me the circle of people with whom I interact. It is not possible for anyone to serve all beings, but if I can worship Him through the people among who I live, it will surely be accepted by Him.

This feeling gradually helped me to control my adverse reactions, and curb the desire to retaliate or misbehave. It increased my tolerance, and that reduced my getting agitated over petty irritations. Being more at peace, the little time I could give to prayers, gave me greater peace.

I am neither a Monk nor a Nun! I am a seeker who lives in the world and tries to attain spiritual progress through my activities. What started as a positive attitude and a form of worship, expanded to animal welfare, because God abides in all beings, and serving Him by serving His most vulnerable and ill-treated children seemed a worthwhile form of worship.

Gradually, the thought came that since almost all the world’s problems are due to a paucity of compassion and ethical awareness, I would like to contribute to the reduction of these evils by writing about the things I learnt from my Guru, and benefited by, as I grew older. Hence, this book.

- How can one develop love for God?

This is a question that troubles every seeker, including myself! I don't know the answer, but I will write what I have heard from my Guru and other great Mahatmas.

Love is an inherent emotion in all beings. Its source is the Almighty who abides in the heart of all beings. Since we can't see Him, we instinctively love our mother first, then others who are close to us, and who bring us pleasure. The circle expands as we grow and as our little world expands. When we get hurt, we withdraw into ourselves, like a tortoise withdraws its limbs at the first sign of danger. Repeated hurts result in a person being afraid to love anyone, and then psychological problems begin.

Our Shastras say that we are not to kill our love for this world; we are to channel it towards the Almighty who abides in all beings. That means, we are to develop a universal benevolence; not restrict our affection and helpfulness to those we are fond of.

The Saints have also recommended that we develop a relationship with the Lord. Relationships with the Lord have been divided into five types, depending on the attitude of the bhakta (devotee). Dasya Bhakti – the love of the servant, Sakhya Bhakti – the love of a friend, Vatsalya Bhakti – the love of a mother, Madhur Bhakti – the love of a lover, and Shanta Bhakti – the love that is tranquil, desiring nothing.

The love of a mother has always been given as an example of the most unselfish love. It is a fact that when a mother works tirelessly for her child, her love for him is deepened. Those who are separated from their baby rarely love the child as much as the child they loved and toiled for as he grew. Even foster mothers love the baby they care for, as if it was their own. So, if we work for the Lord, He becomes more real to us, and our love for Him grows steadily.

The love of a servant appeals to many, because where there is love there is a desire to serve. The love of a true friend is, in the opinion of many, an incomparable love. The love of a sweetheart is overpowering, and the tranquil love – love for its own sake, cannot be considered anything but a very lofty form of love.

Each of these has a little of all the other kinds in it, and each of these can become a form of worship, when we love our children, friends, employers, spouses, or all beings, and think about the Lord who abides in them.

My Guru used to say, ‘When you eat your food, imagine that the little baby Krishna is in your heart, looking at you smilingly, waiting to be fed. As soon as you put the morsel in your mouth, he extends His chubby little hand to take it, and put it into His own mouth. You will not be deprived of the food or its flavor, or the satisfaction of eating, or the nourishment it gives. You will get an additional delight in imagining this scene, and your meal will become a form of worship.’

Apart from this, I have found it immensely helpful to listen to the discourses of people who love God, and listen to devotional songs as I go about my chores. Reading spiritual books and the histories of Saints is also helpful. It brings peace and courage that the path may be long, but since the Almighty loves me enough to have set me on it, He will see to it that I reach my destination – Him, or a state of eternal bliss. They are synonymous!

Let me conclude with a Vedic prayer. May all beings have sukha and good health, may all people develop benevolence, and may none suffer: *Sarve` sukhino bhavantu, sarve` santu niraamayaa, sarve` bhadraani pashyantu, maa kashchid dukha bhaagbhave`t.*

Adieu my friend, I wish you well!

You may laugh when you read this, my friend. You will probably not know who I am; nor do I know who you are. However, it is my firm conviction that we are linked, because I believe that the substratum of all that exists is the one, non-dual Brahman, free of form or attributes, the whole, unfragmented, Sadchitaananda (Sat = pure existence, Chit = pure consciousness, Anand = pure bliss), the Paramatma, the Atma of us all.

This book just ‘came’. That sounds funny, but it is the only way I can describe it. There was no plan to write. I was as much an instrument as the computer I used. You are free to believe that my imagination was working overtime or that what I say is true, and there was a force that impelled the words; call it what you will. If Carl Gustav Jung is to be believed, it could be the ‘collective unconscious’. Be that as it may, this is why I feel that the reader is my unknown friend, and the power that used me to write, used my very dear Harsh to print it, and enabled it to reach your hands.

Physics is gradually revealing secrets that were known to the Rishis of yore. It is my deep conviction that many of the fantastic things given in our ancient books will be shown to be fact; not fiction or imagined by some long gone story teller. For example, science tells us that subtle vibrations were the source of Creation, and this is also what an ancient treatise called ‘The Spanda Tattva’ states. It is difficult to imagine how ancient books on astrology could be so specific and accurate when none

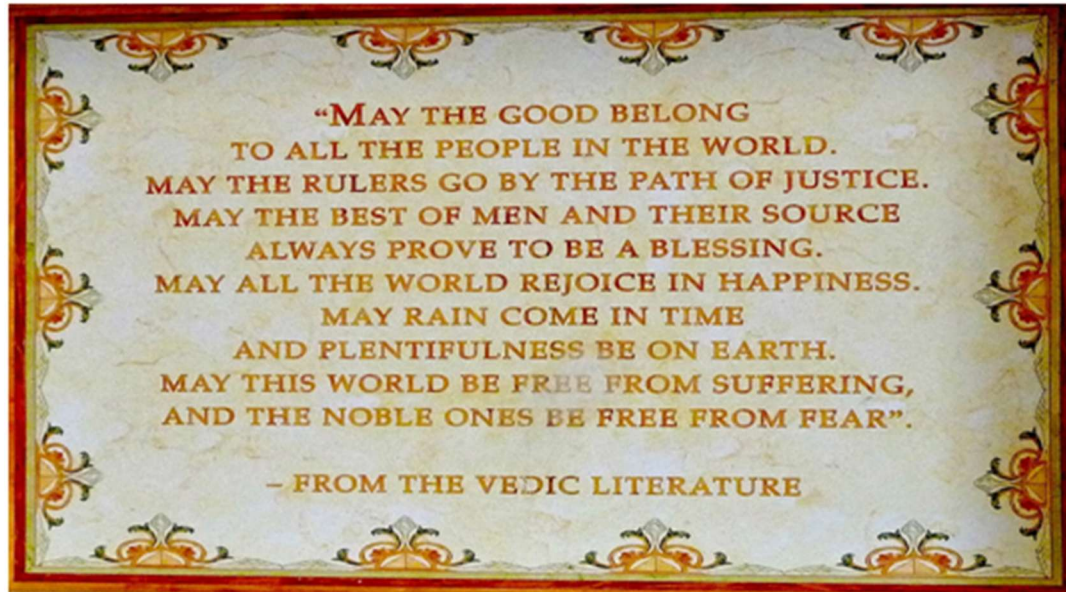
of the present day instruments were available five thousand years ago.

Be that as it may, it is my hope that when people understand the Vedic concept of oneness (Richard Bach has presented it beautifully in ‘One’), they will overcome the tendency to focus on the differences that are the cause of global strife, and turn their minds to the unity in diversity, and the common values of very elevating school of thought. The Brahma – the Brahman – described and eulogized in the Vedas is the goal of every being, because what every being seeks is a happiness that is deep, enduring, constant, derived from everyone and everything, attained effortlessly and felt intensely – and that supreme fulfillment is none other than the Brahman, who is also our true Self, our Atma, a part of the Paramatma, in common with all others.

Recently, I asked Shri Sraddhalu Ranade of Sri Aurobindo Ashram whether it was worth battering one’s head against a wall, trying to bring positive changes. He assured me emphatically that every little positive action strengthens the unseen positive forces that influence the world. Negative actions strengthen the negative forces. If that be the case, each of us carries a considerable responsibility because our every thought and act affects posterity. And so, each of us has to decide whether we care enough to make an effort to promote to good or not.....

Some Vedic shlokas are chosen for your perusal. If you do not believe in a Supreme Power, you can consider that they are

made to your inner Self, your Atma. You will find them inspiring.



Quotes from the Ancient Scriptures of Hinduism

1

Most humbly we bow to You, O Supreme Lord.
At Your command moves the mighty wheel of time.
You are eternal, and beyond eternity.
(Artharva Veda)

2

The one who loves all intensely
begins perceiving in all living beings
a part of himself.
He becomes a lover of all,
a part and parcel of the Universal Joy.
He flows with the stream of happiness,
and is enriched by each soul.

(Yajur Veda)

3

The human body is the temple of God.
One who kindles the light of awareness within
gets true light.
The sacred flame of your inner shrine
is constantly bright.
The experience of unity
is the fulfillment of human endeavors.
The mysteries of life are revealed.

(Rig Veda)

4

Sing the song of celestial love, O singer!
May the divine fountain of eternal grace and joy
enter your soul.
May Brahma, (the Divine One),
Pluck the strings of your inner soul
with His celestial fingers,
And feel His own presence within.
Bless us with a divine voice
That we may tune the harp-strings of our life
To sing songs of Love to you.

(Rig Veda)

5

Of everything he is the inmost Self.
He is the truth; he is the Self supreme.
(Chandogya Upanishad)

6

Meditating on the lotus of your heart,
in the center is the untainted;
the exquisitely pure, clear, and sorrowless;
the inconceivable;
the unmanifest,
of infinite form;
blissful, tranquil, immortal;
the womb of Brahma.
(Kaivalyopanishad)

7

Those in whose hearts OM reverberates
Unceasingly are indeed blessed
And deeply loved as one who is the Self.
The all-knowing Self was never born,
Nor will it die. Beyond cause and effect,
This Self is eternal and immutable.
When the body dies, the Self does not die.
(Katha Upanishad)

8

The whole mantram AUM
Indivisible, interdependent,
Goes on reverberating in the mind.
Established in this cosmic vibration,
The sage goes beyond fear, decay, and death
To enter into infinite peace.
(Prashna Upanishad)

9

O Almighty!
You are the infinite; the universe is also infinite!
From infinite the infinite has come out!
Having taken infinite out of the infinite, the infinite remains!
O Almighty! May there be Peace! Peace! Everywhere!
(Ishawashya Upanishad)

10
O seeker, know the true nature of your soul,
and identify yourself with it completely.
O Lord, (may we attain) the everlasting consciousness
of Supreme Light and Joy.
May we resolve to dedicate our life
to the service of humankind,
and uplift them to Divinity.
(Yajur Veda)

11
O Brahma, lead us from the unreal to the real.
O Brahma, lead us from darkness to light.
O Brahma, lead us from death to immortality.
Shanti, Shanti, Shanti, Om.
(Brhadaranyaka Upanishad)

12
Look to this day,
for it is life, the very breath of life.
In its brief course lie
all the realities of your existence;
the bliss of growth,
the glory of action,

the splendor of beauty.
For yesterday is only a dream,
and tomorrow is but a vision.
But today, well lived,
makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,
and every tomorrow
a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.
(Ancient Sanskrit)

13

The highest Self, all endless bliss,
the unconditioned limitless consciousness,
being realized, whether through the great texts,
or through Yoga, in all experience whatever—
let one lose himself in the ecstasy of Realization,
for he has forever lost all touch
with bondage of every description.
(Svarajyasiddhi)

14

A particle of Its bliss
supplies the bliss of the whole universe.
Everything becomes enlightened in Its light.
All else appears worthless after a sight of that essence.
I am indeed of this Supreme Eternal Self.
(Vijnanananka)

15

The knower catches in the ecstasy of his heart
the full light of that Brahman (that Divine Essence)

which is indescribable—all pure bliss, incomparable,
transcending time, ever free, beyond desire.

(Vivekachudamani)

16

Bright but hidden, the Self dwells in the heart.
Everything that moves, breathes, opens, and closes
Lives in the Self. He is the source of love
And may be known through love but not through thought
He is the goal of life. Attain this goal!

(Mundaka Upanishad)

17

All is change in the world of the senses,
But changeless is the supreme Lord of Love.
Meditate on him, be absorbed by him,
Wake up from this dream of separateness.

(Shvetashvatara Upanishad)

Purnima Lalitkumar Toolsidass.

Troubled by the inequity and suffering in the world, Purnima sought a deeper meaning to life. She found her spiritual guide in her Guru, Swami Akhandanand Saraswati, in 1980. Purnima took to heart his comment, 'Manushya ka janam milaa hai to kuch karke` jao – varna apna pet to kutte aur billi bhi bharate` hain'.

Searching for a way to thank God for all the blessings she had, she decided to dedicate herself to do what she could, to reduce the suffering in the world. Since animals are the most vulnerable of all God's children, she wanted to do her bit to reduce their suffering, and inculcate compassion and ethical awareness in society.

Having spent innumerable hours understanding Swami Akhandanandji's interpretations of our scriptures, Purnima felt deeply troubled by the unhappiness generated by people due to an absence of the right perspective and positive spiritual guidance. 'All strife stems from two basic factors – lack of understanding and/or compassion' is her firm conviction. If we learn to see how fortunate we are, compared to millions of suffering beings, our focus will automatically shift to doing something to ease the pain of another, instead of wallowing in self pity. And, the world will be a happier place, because as Swami Akhandanandji said, 'An unhappy person only spreads gloom; be happy, and spread happiness.'

'Animal welfare is the most powerful tool we have, to improve our own life, our own future, and make our society more compassionate and ethically aware,' she says. 'People who dismiss it as unimportant are depriving themselves of something very precious.'